



INCLUSIVE ISLAM

DISCOVERING ISLAM'S COMMON THREADS

In a world where misunderstandings often eclipse the true essence of faith, *Inclusive Islam* serves as a gentle reminder of the warmth, depth, and universality inherent to Islam. This work speaks of a faith not confined to deserts or ancient scriptures but one deeply intertwined with the shared experiences and yearnings of humanity. Moving beyond the restrictive portrayals of Islam in popular narratives, this book lovingly crafts an intimate portrayal of Prophet Mohammed. It reveals a figure whose message resonates not just in the heartbeats of Arabia but in the collective consciousness of the world. By retracing the footprints of the Abrahamic lineage, it weaves a tale of kindred spirits, from Abraham to Mohammed, and their shared dreams of unity and divine love. At the heart of *Inclusive Islam* is the profound wisdom of the Quran, which calls out like a familiar song, urging us to look beyond labels and divisions. The Quran's metaphor of "the colour of God" stands out, not as a theological construct, but as a heartfelt embrace, celebrating the myriad hues of human experience. With its blend of historical depth, gentle insights, and the comforting embrace of shared humanity, *Inclusive Islam* welcomes readers into the warm hearth of a faith that cherishes unity in diversity.

RASHID SHAZ



Rs. 500.00

ISBN: 93-81461-34-1



9 789381 461341

Inclusive Islam



Inclusive Islam

Discovering Islam's Common Threads

Rashid Shaz



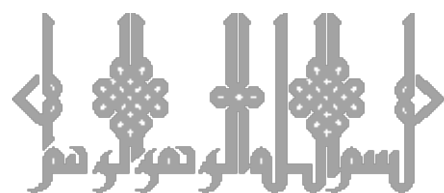
Peace India International
New Delhi

First published in English 2024
© Rashid Shaz
The moral right of the author has been asserted
ISBN – 978-93-81461-34-1
Price: Rs. 500/-

Should you feel moved to reproduce sections from this book,
kindly seek the necessary permissions by contacting the author
via email at futureislam@gmail.com

A produce of Peace India International
Published by Milli Publications,
Milli Times Building,
Abul Fazl Enclave, Jamia Nagar
New Delhi –110025, India
Tel: +91-11-26945499
Mobile/ WhatsApp: +91-7017615883
Email: millitimes@gmail.com
www.millipublications.com

Printed and bound at Thomson Press (India) Ltd



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا
ءَاتَاكُمْ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا
فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

If Allah had willed, He would have made you one nation, but He intends to test you in what He has given you; so race towards all that is good. To Allah is your return, all of you, and He will inform you concerning that over which you used to differ.

(Quran 5:48)

Contents

Prologue / 9

1. Rebuilding a God-Centered World View / 23
2. Unveiling the Prophetic Essence of Islam / 29
3. The Original Fabric of Islam / 35
4. Who Holds the Centre: God or Muhammad / 46
5. Faith Identity & Divine Surrender / 56
6. Muslim Ummah or Muhammadan Community? / 65
7. Islam: Beyond the History of Muslims / 76
8. Perceiving Islam through the Prism of Shariah / 91
9. Islam: An Inclusive Project of Divine ... / 114
10. Conclusion / 134

Postscripts:

Reconstructing the Ummah Muslimah / 141

Whither Muslim Identity? / 152

Notes and References / 163

Glossary / 192

الإسلام

دين جميع الأنبياء وأتباعهم

قال الله تعالى: (إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ) آل عمران: ١٩

يونس: 72	فَإِنْ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَمَا سَأَلْتُكُمْ مِنْ أَجْرٍ إِنْ أَجْرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَى اللَّهِ وَأُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ	نوح عليه السلام
آل عمران: 67	مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ	إبراهيم عليه السلام
البقرة: 133	قَالُوا نَعْبُدُ إِلَهَكَ وَالْآبَاءَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ	اسماعيل واسحاق عليه السلام
البقرة: 132	وَوَصَّى بِهَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ بَنِيهِ وَيَعْقُوبُ يَا بَنِيَّ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَى لَكُمُ الدِّينَ فَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ	يعقوب عليه السلام
يوسف: 101	تَوَفِّيْ مُسْلِمًا وَآلْحِقْنِي بِالصَّالِحِينَ	يوسف عليه السلام
الأعراف: 126	رَبَّنَا أَفْرِغْ عَلَيْنَا صَبْرًا وَتَوَفَّنَا مُسْلِمِينَ	موسى عليه السلام
النمل: 42	وَأَوْتَيْنَا الْعِلْمَ مِنْ قَبْلُهَا وَكُنَّا مُسْلِمِينَ	سليمان عليه السلام
المائدة: 44	إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا التَّوْرَةَ فِيهَا هُدًى وَنُورٌ يَحْكُمُ بِهَا النَّبِيُّونَ الَّذِينَ أَسْلَمُوا لِلَّذِينَ هَادُوا	انبياء بني اسرائيل
النمل: 44	قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي وَأَسْلَمْتُ مَعَ سُلَيْمَانَ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ	ملكة سبا
آل عمران: 52	قَالَ الْخَوَارِثُونَ نَحْنُ أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَأَشْهَدُ بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ	اتباع عيسى عليه السلام

Prologue

IN THE MULTIFACETED HUMAN experience, the concept of pluralism or inclusivity often finds itself ensnared in a paradox. On the surface, it seems to promise a harmonious coexistence, a peaceful symphony of diverse voices. But the practical realization of this ideal frequently dissolves into a coercive pragmatism, where different ideological and ethnic strands clash rather than complement, battling for dominance rather than singing in harmony. It paints a picture of a society at war with itself, casting shadows of doubt over the future of pluralism and dimming the glimmering appeal it once held. Yet, within the rich tapestry of Islamic thought, a different melody resonates. Here, pluralism is not an uneasy compromise but a divinely ordained reality, an integral part of the Creator's grand design. It calls for a federation of faith communities, transcending divisions, and laying the spiritual foundation for a global system of justice.

To Muslims, the vast array of ethnic and ideological differences is not a challenge to be overcome but a magnificent gift from God, a divine mystery to be embraced. The Quran's voice echoes this sentiment, proclaiming, 'O Mankind, We have created you male and female and raised you as races and tribes so that you recognize one another. Surely, the noblest among you in the sight of God is one who is most God-conscious' (Q 49:13). Herein lies an affirmation of diversity as part of a sacred scheme, encompassing not only racial and ethnic distinctions

but extending to religious and ideological ones as well. As further articulated in the Quran, 'Had God so willed, He would certainly have raised you as one nation but it is (His plan) to test you in what He has given you so compete with one another in good deeds' (Q 5:48).

In these profound verses, we discover a clear instruction to not merely tolerate but to cherish socio-religious diversity. The Islamic model of pluralism unfolds as a spiritual journey, inviting us to see the 'other' not as a stranger but as a reflection of a shared humanity. It challenges us to look beyond superficial divisions and recognize the intrinsic unity that binds us. In a world often torn by strife, the Islamic vision of pluralism offers a luminous path, guiding us toward a more compassionate and interconnected existence, where differences are celebrated, and where the human spirit may find its fullest expression in the beauty of its diversity.

In the mosaic of global faith traditions, the figure of Prophet Mohammed emerges as an emblem of universality, a beacon of mercy to all humanity (رحمة للعالمين), and a Warner and bringer of glad tidings to all (بشيرا ونذيرا). Yet, this cosmic dimension of his message seems to elude the Western gaze, where Islam is often reduced to an ethnic or regional phenomenon, confined to the boundaries of the Middle East, with its prophet seen merely as an Arabian figure. This narrowed perspective extends to the Quran, which, in the Western mindset, is often categorized alongside the Bible or the Torah, confined to the religious sphere of a particular community. Such a vision of Islam, blurred by the barriers of language and cultural misunderstanding, obscures the true face of this ancient tradition, rendering it distant and foreign to many in the West. In the East, a different understanding prevails, where Islam is perceived less as an ideological badge and more as an attitude of humble submission to the divine.

Here, the wisdom of the prophetic narrative - الإسلام ليس بتمني فقط - ولكن ما وقر في القلب و صدق له العمل - resonates in the hearts and minds, shaping the discourse and the spiritual practice.

Interestingly, the perception of Islam in the West finds an unusual advocate in W. C. Smith, a Christian scholar who embraced the notion of being a Muslim, a submitter to God, in the religious tradition of Jesus Christ. In his linguistic exploration, he drew a distinction between being a 'Muslim' in Arabic, meaning a submitter, and being a 'Muslim' in English, denoting community identity. His insight opens a window into the essence of Islam that transcends cultural boundaries.

If we were to bridge the chasm created by translation and cultural bias, to uncover the universal principles embedded within Islam, it might lead to a profound realization. Herein lies a faith not confined to a particular time or place, but a collective heritage of humankind, a confluence of prophetic wisdom, and a path that resonates with the deepest yearnings of the human soul.

The challenge, then, is to move beyond the stereotypes and misunderstandings that have clouded our vision, to see Islam not as a distant other but as part of the rich tapestry of human spirituality. In embracing this more inclusive perspective, we may find a way to connect with Islam's universal message of compassion, justice, and human solidarity, recognizing it as a shared spiritual journey that transcends all divisions.

The portrayal of Mohammed as solely an Arabian prophet, or Islam as merely an Arabic phenomenon, belies a deeper truth that transcends geography and ethnicity. While it cannot be denied that the origins of Islam are rooted in the Arabian landscape, its essence reaches far beyond these confines. From its very inception, the mission of the Prophet Mohammed was framed as a continuation and revival of the ancient faith of

Abraham, whom the Quran holds up as a timeless exemplar for all who submit to the divine.

This perspective shifts the emphasis away from mere identity or affiliation and places it firmly on the sincerity of faith (iman) and the purity of action (عمل صالح). The Quran transcends the religious labels of Jew or Christian (the Muslims of that time), focusing instead on the universal principles that connect all spiritual seekers. It is not the label one bears, but the truth one embraces and the virtues one embodies that determine one's place in the cosmic order.

The Quran articulates this profound truth with eloquence: 'Those who believe and those of Jewry, and the Christians and the Sabians, whosoever believes in God and the hereafter and work righteousness – shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.' (Q 2:62)

Herein lies a universal message of inclusivity, a divine affirmation that acknowledges the multiplicity of paths leading to the Divine. It is an invitation to recognize the shared spiritual heritage that unites us all, transcending the boundaries of tradition and culture. In a world often fragmented by religious division, the wisdom of this Quranic passage calls us to a higher plane of understanding, inviting us to see the common threads of faith, hope, and love that weave the human family together.

Within the tapestry of faith traditions, the Islamic social order emerges as a harmonious mosaic, comprised of various faiths and ideologies, all singing in unison to glorify the Divine and competing in the pursuit of righteousness. It is an understanding deeply anchored in the Quran, one that transcends the narrow boundaries of religious division and calls forth a more universal vision.

Indeed, to be a Muslim is to be an inheritor of a prophetic tradition that reaches back through time, encompassing not just

the message of Mohammed, with whom the tradition concludes, but embracing all the prophets across history and geography. It is a faith that recognizes the continuity of divine revelation, binding together the wisdom of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets in a shared spiritual heritage.

The Quran articulates this beautifully: 'Say: We believe in God and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord: we make no difference between one and another of them (لأنفرق بين احد منهم): and we submit to God.' (Q 2:136)

The belief in all prophets, without distinction or preference, forms the bedrock of submission to God within the Islamic tradition. It's a principle that transcends mere religious identification, seeking to unite rather than divide. The Quran emphatically underscores this point, declaring: 'So if they believe as ye believe, they are indeed on the right path; but if they turn back, it is they who are in schism' (Q 2:137). This verse calls us to a deeper recognition of the shared spiritual lineage that binds all believers, urging us to look beyond the cultural and religious labels that so often become barriers to understanding. It points to a vision of an ideal Islamic society, one that transcends cultural limitations and embraces the richness of the entire prophetic tradition.

Such a society would be marked not by uniformity, but by a vibrant and inclusive diversity, where differing faith traditions converge in a shared commitment to divine truth. It is a vision encapsulated in the beautiful Quranic phrase 'the colour of God,' or صبغة الله, a metaphor that speaks of a way of being that reflects the very essence of the Divine. This 'colour of God' was once a distinguishing feature of the Muslim community, a sign of its openness, its spiritual depth, its willingness to see the Divine in all its varied expressions. If revived in its fullness, it

could once again serve as a beacon of inclusivity, where diverse faith communities would not merely coexist but feel truly at home.

Islam transcends the notion of being cantered around a singular human figure, such as Mohammed, and instead urges us towards a more universal embrace of the Divine. It calls us to become 'rabbani,' cultivating a God-cantered society that recognizes the sanctity of diverse paths of faith. This perspective lays the groundwork for an inclusive society where all faith traditions can not only coexist but thrive. The Quran's teachings reverberate with echoes of this all-encompassing vision, as illustrated in Surah Haj: 'Had God not checked one group of people by another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of God is commemorated in abundant measure.' (Q 22:46)

These profound words illustrate a divine intention to maintain the diverse and pluralistic composition of society, recognizing the divine presence in places of worship across various faith traditions.

Such an expansive view led to historical instances where Muslims acted as protectors of other religious communities' places of worship, even in times of difficulty. A poignant example of this can be found in the treaty that the Prophet Mohammed made with the Christians of Najran, offering assurance and protection for their religious establishments. This spirit was further embodied when the Prophet sent Muaz bin Jabal to Yemen, instructing him to respect the religious life of the Jews. These historical narratives paint a picture of Islam that moves beyond the limited perspective of religious exclusivity. They offer a testament to the religion's underlying ethos of compassion, respect, and recognition of the shared human quest for understanding the Divine.

In the annals of history, we find a remarkable period when the Muslim empire was blossoming, expanding, and reaching the zenith of its cultural and intellectual achievements, particularly during the golden age of Abbasid Baghdad. During this time, Muslims were a minority in major cities, yet the social fabric remained remarkably pluralistic, even in the splendours of Moorish Spain and Fatimid Cairo.

Islam's teachings, which allowed socializing and forming familial bonds with the People of the Book, fostered an environment where different faith communities were not only tolerated but integrated into every layer of society. They could dine together, intermarry, and even ascend to significant governmental positions. The seamless weaving of these diverse threads into the fabric of Muslim society represents an extraordinary and enlightened period of history.

Regrettably, this harmonious trend faced a grave setback during the reign of al-Mutawakkil, a turning point that marked a departure from the pluralistic ethos previously embraced. His imposition of restrictive measures—banning public displays of crosses, affixing wooden images to Christian houses, prohibiting Jewish rites, and even demolishing newly built churches—signalled a shift in attitude. These actions, sadly, were contrary to the Quran's teachings of acceptance and respect for diverse faith traditions.

In the annals of Islamic history, two enigmatic stories appear, having profound implications on the Muslim attitude toward Jews and Christians. These stories, intertwined with political motivations and misinterpretations, have left an indelible mark on the fabric of interfaith relations.

The first story involves the alleged annihilation of 600 Jews of Khayber during the time of the Prophet, a narrative that emerged possibly during the Abbasid era. Its genesis is shrouded in political manoeuvring, perhaps aiming to

undermine Jewish and Christian influence in bureaucracy. However, attributing such an act to the Prophet, widely recognized as a mercy unto all humanity, is highly unlikely and discordant with his life's teachings. Meticulous scholarship, such as the work done by Mr. Barkat Ahmed, has revealed the internal contradictions of this narrative, casting doubt on its authenticity and exposing its role in altering perceptions.

The second story, referred to as the 'Omerian Stipulations,' is equally puzzling. Its origin is nebulous, and historians are divided over whether it pertains to Caliph Omar, Omar bin Abdulaziz, or some other figure named Omar. This document, filled with prohibitions and restrictions on Christians, seems entirely incongruent with the respect and decency exemplified by Caliph Omar in his dealings with the Christians of Jerusalem. Some scholars argue that this so-called 'Omerian Stipulations' may actually be a draft proposal, presented by the Christians of Syria to the Caliph to pre-empt conflict, never having received his sanction or signature. Unfortunately, its subsequent adoption in legal discourse gave it an air of legitimacy, thereby solidifying its influence.

Islam's portrayal as an exclusivist faith is a misapprehension that has obscured its true essence. Its foundational text, the Quran, proclaims an inclusivity that transcends the barriers of religious identity, embracing all those who submit to the divine will. Such a concept, though baffling to some traditional exegetes, is deeply embedded in the Quranic worldview.

Verses that seemingly imply the exclusivity of Islam, such as 'Indeed, the religion with Allah is Islam' (إن الدين عند الله الإسلام) and 'And whoever desires other than Islam as religion - never will it be accepted from him' (ومن يتبع غير الإسلام ديناً فلن يقبل منه), have led to the perception that salvation is confined solely to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad. This interpretation,

however, becomes untenable when we explore the broader Quranic perspective.

In the Quranic landscape, terms like al-Islam and حنيفا مسلما are not confined to the followers of Muhammad but extend to encompass the true adherents of earlier faith traditions. Even the term 'Ummah Muslimah,' which has been uniquely associated with the Muslim community in modern times, includes all Abrahamic prophets and their sincere followers.

The profound message at the core of these teachings is the universal concept of submission - total and unequivocal surrender to the divine will. In this encompassing vision, the particularities of religious affiliation dissolve, and what emerges is a shared journey of faith, guided by the principles of righteousness, sincerity, and devotion.

By understanding Islam not as an exclusive identity but as a pathway to divine unity that is open to all humanity, we can appreciate the Quran's assurance that those who follow this path, regardless of their religious tradition, 'shall have no fear nor shall they grieve.' In this light, Islam becomes a spiritual tapestry that weaves together the diverse threads of human experience, reflecting a universal longing for connection with the transcendent.

In the labyrinthine corridors of Islamic exegesis, the notion of abrogation has emerged as a complex and often divisive tool of interpretation. By declaring certain Quranic verses abrogated or superseded, some scholars have sought to curtail or sideline the universal and embracing message of the Quran, a message that resonates with the hearts and minds of believers from various faith traditions. This exegetical manoeuvring is not without serious ramifications. To declare any part of the Quran unworthy of guidance or unfit for practice is to tread perilously close to a profound theological transgression. Can one really

assert that any portion of the divine revelation, if followed sincerely, would invoke divine displeasure?

Though the shadow of supposed abrogation has been cast over the text, it has never wholly obscured the light of inclusivity that shines through the Quran's pages. Indeed, many eminent scholars have resisted this interpretive approach, steadfastly upholding the enduring relevance and validity of the so-called abrogated verses.

Luminaries such as Abu Hamid Ghazali, Rasheed Rida, and Allama Tabatabaei are counted among those who have championed the universality of the Quran's message. They have refused to be confined by restrictive readings and have instead embraced a holistic understanding of the text that resonates with the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings. In our current age, characterized by both the beauty and the pain of our diverse human tapestry, the challenge and the opportunity lie in reclaiming this universalistic vision of Islam.

Universal Values without a Super Religion

In the kaleidoscope of a pluralistic society, where varying shades of faith and secularism collide and coalesce, the question looms large: What are the universal values that can govern us all? Can secularists, civil rights activists, and proponents of diverse ideologies also find their place in a mosaic where faith is often the mortar? Is there a common strand that weaves us together, or are we forever destined to be fragments?

Let us turn to an ancient parable for guidance. The Quran presents the Covenant of Adam, a profound allegory that speaks to the very core of our human nature. When God questioned the seeds of humanity, "Am I not your Lord?" their response was a unanimous and resounding, "Yes, we testify" (Q 7:172). This covenant, etched into the very soul of every human being,

is known as *fitrah*—an innate moral compass, a spark of divine wisdom that helps us discern right from wrong.

The *fitrah*, however, is not the sole province of the believer. It is the shared inheritance of all humankind. While the religions might draw from both reason and revelation, the secularist also has access to this inbuilt wisdom, albeit without the additional guidance of scripture. In this shared space of moral understanding, believers and secularists might find common ground, a tapestry of values woven not from the threads of any particular religious tradition but from the shared fabric of human experience.

But we must be cautious in our quest for unity, for the lure of a super religion—an amalgamation of beliefs, a synthesis of traditions—may seduce us. The pursuit of a universal creed must not overshadow the beauty of our distinct paths or the integrity of our individual beliefs. Pluralism does not demand the melting of differences into a homogenized whole but rather celebrates diversity within a harmonious framework. The path to understanding need not traverse the labyrinthine corridors of dogma or the shadowed alleys of ideology. It is a path that leads to the human heart, where the *fitrah* resides, ready to guide us if we but listen. It is a call to universal values without a super religion, a call to recognize our shared humanity and to embrace the multi-coloured mosaic that is our world. By honouring the *fitrah*, the innate wisdom within us all, we may yet build a society where diverse beliefs are not barriers but bridges, and where the echo of the divine resonates in the chorus of our shared values.

In our time, the rise of global anti-war and ecological movements, drawing together diverse ethnicities and religious backgrounds, illuminates the possibility of pluralism in our world. Differences in understanding the common good, or ‘*al-maruf*’, are present: "For each community, We have appointed a

law and a way of life" (Q 5:48). Yet, these differences need not be barriers but can be bridges towards greater harmony. The concept of common good in all cultures requires a degree of tolerance that safeguards various paradigms. This is not an endorsement of uniformity but an acknowledgment of shared human pursuit. The dream of a smoothly functioning, pluralistic world is not unattainable, but rather within our grasp, as we recognize our shared humanity and mutual aspirations.

Can Religion Change?

The notion that religious edicts are immutable is often assumed, particularly within the Islamic tradition. Yet history and practice reveal a more nuanced reality. Even the early Caliphs such as Umar ibn al-Khattab demonstrated that Islamic rulings could be altered or suspended in response to the shifting sands of time and circumstance. For example, Umar refrained from administering *مولفة القلوب* to new converts and ceased the distribution of conquered lands as spoils of war. Most strikingly, he even suspended the Quranic penalty of amputating a thief's hand during a time of famine.

These adjustments were not arbitrary, nor did they occur in isolation. Later, the Mamluk Sultan Baybars's formal recognition of the four schools of fiqh, though it led to schisms and even allowed for four simultaneous prayers within the holy Harem, was in service of a larger unity and legal coherence. The House of Saud's subsequent unification of these prayers stands as an example of political will and religious wisdom applied in concert.

Across the expanse of Islamic history, thinkers such as Abdulwahab, Al-Afghani, Abdahu, and Muhammed Iqbal have engaged in a relentless endeavour to align Islam's teachings with the evolving world without undermining its essence. Iqbal's call

in his Reconstruction lectures for the right of ijma (consensus) to be vested in an elected assembly was a profound recognition that even ijma of the past could be revisited if rooted in the Quran, the foundation document or *حجة بعد الرسل*.

The flexibility within the faith tradition does not represent a deviation or a dalliance with modernity at the expense of core principles. Rather, it is a living testament to a religion that retains its vitality by engaging with the world as it changes. The process of readjusting Islam's vision, making it resonate with new contexts, reveals not a betrayal of faith but an embracing of the universal and timeless within the particular and temporal. It echoes a profound truth that faith is not frozen in time but a dynamic force moving in rhythm with the heartbeat of humanity.

Rebuilding a God-Centered Worldview

IN THE RICH AND COMPLEX interplay between us humans, the cosmos, and the Divine, we uncover the roots of our multifaceted perceptions of life. When our understanding of these relationships reverberates with the truth of reality, it seems to elicit Divine affirmation, mirroring the Qur'an's solemn proclamation of God's unrivalled divinity: "Allah bears witness that there is no deity but Him." Under this perspective, monotheism ascends beyond a mere belief system; it becomes a comprehensive worldview that helps us decipher our role within the universe, crafting a bridge between the cerebral and the metaphysical dimensions.

The influence of divine revelation on human civilization's course is considerably profound. The followers of Prophet Muhammad's teachings harboured an intense sense of stewardship over the cosmos, seen as a component of the infinite Divine universe. They believed their mission was to guide the world's nations through the labyrinth of history. This deep-rooted conviction fortified them against even the most potent, highly organized states.

The faith in a divinely ordained purpose within history, coupled with the Divine's endorsement, gives a community an

unshakeable determination. Opposing such a group is akin to resisting the flow of history itself. This belief laid the foundations for the astonishing accomplishments of Prophet Muhammad's early followers. Their quick and sweeping conquests sprung from this divinely guided worldview and unwavering self-confidence.

Muslims during this period grasped their Divinely assigned role within the cosmic order. The universe, to them, was not an enigma but an open field for exploration and discovery. Their resolute belief in the Divine's support prepared them to face any peril or challenge fearlessly. Historians can clearly witness how this small band of Muhammad's followers seized control of history, steering civilization according to their purpose and determination.

Under the wide, expansive umbrella of the monotheistic or Rabbani worldview, a new form of civilization began to sprout. This worldview set the stage for a social and cultural order that prized intellectual engagement, discovery, experimentation, and acute observation. The shift from inductive to deductive reasoning became more pronounced, signalling a transformation in the means of contemplation and thought.

This new system did not accept traditions and practices without scrutiny. It invited and even urged its followers to assess the collective wisdom and knowledge of human civilization through the lens of personal experience and keen observation. The retort to the age-old practice of "We found our forefathers doing so" (وجدنا آبائنا كذا الك يفعلون) appeared to be an almost audibly resonant message coming from every corner, echoing the Qur'anic verse, "Those were a people who have passed away. They shall reap the fruit of what they did, and you of what you do! And you will not be asked of what they used to do" (تلك امة قد خلت لهما ما كسبت ولكم ما كسبتم ولا تسئلون عما كانوا يعملون).

In the foundational centuries of Islam, the minds of Muslims grappled with numerous intellectual challenges and opposition. The revelation of the Quran had upended the traditional modes of thought, sending ripples through the established paradigms of human intellect and contemplation. It was inevitable then, that the great wealth of human cultural heritage, when subjected to this analytical rigor, would undergo significant transformation.

Natural sciences, employing a deductive methodology, eventually emerged triumphant, casting a shadow over the erstwhile unchallenged credibility of stalwarts like Aristotle, Galen, and Ptolemy. While this seismic shift took several centuries to materialize, the fields of philosophy and metaphysics, unfortunately, did not experience such rigorous and transformative scrutiny.

The tradition of Kalam, a school of thought nurtured in the crucible of Muslim-Christian dialogues, started to be misinterpreted as a valid expression of jurisprudential methodology, an unfortunate deviation from its true purpose. Even the internal political disputes among Muslims were not spared the influence of this style of thinking. The Kharijites, when they levied accusations of disbelief against Ali (may God be pleased with him) over the arbitration issue, had, in fact, unwittingly become victims of this very Kalam-style thought process. As the pages of history turned, we find an increasing propensity to elevate political discourses to theological heights, scrutinizing them through the scholarly lens of Kalam, or Islamic theology. This led to the formal establishment of distinct schools of thought based on political differences, effectively paving the way for the formation of disparate and often contradictory interpretations within Islam.

Consider the Kharijites, the offspring of a highly charged and intricate political climate. The community found itself amidst a perplexing state of disorder, with fellow Muslims drawing swords against each other, a situation that was virtually unfathomable to the traditional frameworks of Islamic theology.

Moving forward in time, Islamic jurisprudence, which had come to be viewed as the primary tool for elucidation and interpretation, was stymied by its own entrenched scholarly language and style. Rather than providing a route to a more accurate and truthful understanding of our religious tradition, this scholastic approach to thought effectively cemented and perpetuated our divergences from the intended path.¹ In the ceaseless dance of time, the sharp lines of political conflict seeped into the spiritual, muddying the clear spring that was the crux of Islamic thought. By the time the fourth century of Islam arrived, the radiant and unified message of Muhammad had become an echoing chorus of diverse voices: the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, and Ahl al-Bayt, each claiming a direct lineage from the Prophet, each espousing their interpretation as the true continuation of faith.

As centuries marched on, the dance of theology and jurisprudence spun evermore intricate patterns. The unity that was once the backbone of Muhammad's message was now but a dim echo amidst the clamour of Sunni, Shia, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Ibadi, Isma'ili and countless other factions. Each sect clung to its own dogma with fervour, and the result was a befuddling cacophony that many mistook for the original symphony of the faith.

Well-intentioned attempts by scholars and revivalists to harmonize this discordant score were unfortunately confined to superficial arrangements. They failed to pierce the dense fog of confusion and recognize that these internal strifes were not inherent to Islam but rather the result of historical deviations

and theoretical entanglements. From this discordant mix, a lasting unity could not be formed, nor could these variances resonate with the empowering symphony that was once the soul of Islam. As theological discourse intensified, the very human facets of religious interpretation and understanding took on an almost sacred quality. Thinkers of great magnitude found themselves entrapped in the misleading notion that revitalising faith could only be achieved through a harmonious amalgamation of its splintered and clashing fragments.

From the enlightened period of Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah to the times of Shah Waliullah and Muhammad Iqbal, a common thread wove itself through their grand intellectual pursuits. Despite their profound scholarly capabilities, they consistently superimposed the scattered, disparate facets of religion onto its innate historical and progressive contours.

The end product of their intellectual labour was always the same: rather than attempting to collapse the ever-expanding canopy of religious interpretations, they strove to recreate an indivisible, original essence of faith from these sprawling segments. Their primary ambition was to retrieve the undiluted, primal version of the faith, by navigating through the convoluted maze of its varying interpretations.

While it may seem bold to critically examine our intellectual history, we must remember that the echoes of twelve centuries stand behind this assertion. To reinterpret Islam in its primal purity and harmonize the Ummah with the unified spirit of Muhammad's message, we must bravely navigate back to those historical junctures where our intellectual caravan strayed, giving rise to a multitude of diverse legalistic, theoretical, and sectarian identities.

Until we rekindle the highway of thought and vision, our journey remains incomplete. In simpler terms, our primary quest is to unearth that Islam from the shadows of twelve

centuries past - the Islam that once filled our hearts with a sense of purpose so powerful that we became an Ummah, united in conviction and devotion. The luminous traces of this Islam still glimmer on the pages of the divine revelation, shimmering with an undiminished vitality and warmth.

Unveiling the Prophetic Essence of Islam

AT THE ADVENT OF ISLAM, a pure, unified vision pervaded its existence, endowing it with a resilience that could withstand even the most potent of external interventions. Within the kaleidoscope of different interpretations and perspectives, there was a prevailing unity among Muslims. There was no division into Shiite or Sunni, Ibadi or Ismaili - all drew breath from the same universal prophetic message of Muhammad. This was a time before the emergence of the four great Imams, before the notions of Seven or Twelve Imams had even entered the realm of contemplation. Neither *Al-Risalah* by Al-Shafi'i nor the theological finesse of Abu Hanifa had yet entered the public discourse. The *Muwatta* of Imam Malik was still in the future, and the disparate collections of Shiite and Sunni traditions had yet to be compiled. In this era, the Word of God, as embodied in the Quran, served as the ultimate reference point for all discussions and debates among Muslims, binding the community together around a shared ideological foundation.

Indeed, the early Islam unfolded in an environment where different interpretations of divine revelation surfaced naturally, due in part to the varied intellectual aptitude of the recipients. Yet, the prospect of founding separate philosophical schools

based on these variations would have been unthinkable. During this early period, Islam was characterised by a depth of devotion that emphasised the very spirit of servitude over meticulous rituals. Early Muslims understood well that while the creative interpretation of words can unveil meanings in the search for revelation, their rigid and narrow interpretations can also form impediments to the transmission of spiritual insight. Without a heart that is passionate and yearning in the quest for transcendental truths, a reader is left wrestling with nothing more than lifeless, static words. This intrinsic constraint of language necessitated the exploration of varied approaches to communicate fundamental ideas like monotheism, rather than a singular, formulaic doctrine. The intention was to illuminate diverse intellectual planes through manifold expressions, whilst ensuring that this essential truth never vanished from view: "If all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean, with seven more oceans, were ink, still these would not suffice to describe the wonders of the Creator." (Quran 31:27)

In the formative milieu of conscious devotion, a commitment to ritualistic worship was evident, although it was not bound by a rigid structure. An episode from the Hajj narrates that some Companions, having deviated from the prescribed sequence of rites, were not reprimanded by Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him). Instead, he gently reminded them that the heart of their actions should not cause any hardship to their brethren in faith.

Those early Muslims were navigating an uncharted sea of devotional practice, yet their understanding of the subtleties of jurisprudence was embryonic at best. They weren't equipped to discern the obligatory from the desirable, the Sunnah from the optional, or the encouraged from the discouraged. In this context, the Holy Quran was seen not as a manual of law, but rather as a compass guiding the faithful towards practices of

worship, charity, compassion, justice, Hajj, Zakat, and acceptable consumption habits.

The Quran also posed as a bulwark against actions that threatened social harmony, such as murder, theft, deceit, and usury, advocating for their unequivocal avoidance. It bore particular emphasis on the protection of the rights of the society's most vulnerable - the slaves and women, highlighting their especial entitlement to empathy and consideration. Amid the six thousand plus verses of the Quran, one would scarcely come across statutory entries. At most, one could account for a meagre one hundred and fifty such verses. This number barely stretches to five hundred even when incorporating certain admonitory declarations. It's not surprising, therefore, that the first generation of Muslims did not see the Quran as a sort of ledger for juristic study.

This generation was acutely aware that once the fervour of sincere worship is quenched, strict adherence to visible legal standards - even in the realm of prayer - cannot provide sanctuary against the profound spiritual loss. The Quran itself warns of the perils of a rigidly legalistic mindset when it admonishes those neglectful in their prayers in verses 107: 4-5, "Woe to those who pray, but are heedless of their prayer". Their vision had been so entangled in the rites of devotion that they lost sight of the true purpose of worship.

In Islamic jurisprudence and theology, pivotal questions loomed large: What constitutes a Muslim, and what are the bare minimum requirements to maintain this identity? These questions represented an attempt to view Islam through a somewhat unfamiliar lens, igniting debates about the actions that could potentially expel one from the fold of Islam.

Does being a Muslim merely encapsulate faith and doctrinal belief, or is it intrinsically linked with deeds validating such belief? Some, basing their views on Islamic traditions, argued

that the simple utterance of 'There is no god but Allah' was enough to retain one's Muslim identity. Conversely, others drew on aphorisms such as 'Islam is not by mere wishful thinking, but rather what settles in the heart and is affirmed by deeds,' in an attempt to assess the faith of dissenters.

Relying on traditions like 'Islam is built on five [pillars],' some believed that following these five pillars was adequate for the fulfilment of one's religious duties. Meanwhile, there were others who integrated the concept of Imamatus (leadership) into the fundamental tenets of the religion, arguing that without it, any effort to retain Muslim identity was somewhat lacking. In the quest to establish a legalistic definition of 'Muslim' and the bare minimum requirements to maintain such an identity, we inadvertently veered off-course. We found ourselves busy demarcating the edges where, as per Islamic jurists, the realm of disbelief began. However, in this zealous delineation, we lost sight of the central act of devotion which is the beating heart of Islam.

This pursuit led to the birth of a multitude of theological schisms such as the Jahmiyyah, Qadariyyah, Jabriyyah, Khawarij, and a plethora of others. The faith of each group was then scrutinized through the judicial lens of another, causing faith to become a disputable topic rather than a unifying force. Consequently, the fraternity was marred by suspicion and division, with the unity of faith often being the first casualty.

In the heart of Islam, there pulses a fundamental ethos: complete surrender, an all-encompassing devotion that calls for faith, not the barren landscape of dogmas. This meticulous arranging and encoding of doctrinal beliefs by Islamic theologians is an anomaly that diverts from the essential temperament of Islam.

It's a profound mutation in the Muslim psyche, this transition from the realm of faith to the sterile corridors of

dogma. A metamorphosis of this magnitude alters the very path of our intellectual odyssey. It mirrors the transmutation that occurs when a living, wholehearted faith gradually morphs into a defined, rigid religion. When faith is ensconced in the sanctuary of complete devotion, believers resonate with a powerful rhythm, embodying the spirit of the Quranic verse (2:177): "True righteousness is not merely turning your faces towards East or West, but it is to believe in Allah, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, and the Prophets..."

Such faith becomes so intrinsically interlaced with their being, their identity is inconceivable without it. Conversely, the dogmatic charter dances a tedious waltz around the technicalities of belief, pondering which doctrines are indispensable for one to wear the badge of 'bona fide' Muslim, and which could potentially exile one from the borders of Islam. Faith, in this context, becomes an integral part of the believer's persona, while dogma amounts to a hollow structure that merely demands intellectual assent.

As Islam moved forward, it began to grapple with a profound transformation - an emerging discourse that attempted to encapsulate faith, or Iman, within the confines of belief, or Aqeedah. This shift stirred up a tempestuous theoretical maelstrom, tearing the fabric of unity and leading the community down a path of intellectual skirmishes and ideological turbulence.

The emergent discourse wasn't without consequences. Suddenly, complex philosophical notions, such as the attributes of the divine and the very nature of divine revelation, were drawn into the vortex of theological debate. Were the divine revelations eternal or were they bound by time? These questions, born from this newly minted paradigm of belief, plunged the community into a protracted period of intellectual tumult.

As the wheel of time spun forward, new dimensions were added to the Islamic belief system. Concepts and beliefs like resurrection, torment of the grave, the questioning angels Munkar and Nakeer, the Bridge of Sirat, and apocalyptic figures like Mehdi and Dajjal, slowly but surely found their way into the corpus of Islamic beliefs. Paradoxically, the resultant diversity of belief was such that one group's charter of beliefs was no longer palatable to another.

The grip of theological jurisprudence held the community in its iron clasp. The rigidity of this new jurisprudence was such that it blinded even the most enlightened minds to the seismic shift from a paradigm of faith to that of belief. Despite the fierce opposition to the theologians, the foundational texts of jurisprudence remained under the thrall of the theological methodology.

By the close of the third century Hijri, the theological method had become so entrenched that it was nearly unthinkable to engage in scholarly discourse without its influence. This re-framing of Islam as an aggregation of beliefs was a grave misstep. It signalled the dawn of a perilous innovation. It acted as a convex lens, refracting and distorting the faith's original intent, allowing the fog of ambiguities to thicken and darken over the passage of time.

The Original Fabric of Islam

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM necessitates recognizing that it is far more than just another religion bearing the stamp of Prophet Muhammad. It's an erroneous perception to envision the Muslim community merely as a counterpart to communities that followed other prophets, graced with the receipt of a divine message, akin to other Abrahamic faiths. This common perception, however prevalent, lacks the profundity needed to appreciate the true magnitude and distinctive honour of Islam.

The first step towards a deeper understanding of Islam is to see it not just as a religion, parallel to others, but as 'al-Din', the singular path of devotion accepted by God. There is a recurring emphasis in the Quranic verses like "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam" and "And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him". These verses bear testimony to the notion that God does not accept any form of worship other than that prescribed by Islam. Consequently, a pertinent question arises: what precisely is this 'al-Islam' or 'al-Din'? It is presented as a sine qua non for gaining God's favour, but what does it encompass in its essence?

Islam, at its core, isn't solely a faith or a mere set of doctrines. It is a state of being, a surrender and commitment so profound and unreserved that it permeates every dimension of life, touching the very essence of existence. Throughout history,

all the prophets - those spiritual navigators - had walked and advocated this very path of uncompromising surrender to the divine.

Contrary to the usual understanding of Islam as simply the faith brought forth by Prophet Muhammad, the Quranic narrative presents it as the spiritual tradition espoused by all authentic prophets. From this vantage point, Islam transcends the temporal and spatial confines usually associated with the concept of religion. It is enlightening to note that while the Quran frequently uses the term 'Deen', indicating religion or faith, it never uses 'Adyaan', the plural form, implying multiple religions. This absence of plurality reinforces the idea of a singular, divine path of devotion that has been the crux of all prophetic teachings. It underlines the Quranic emphasis on a universal spirituality - a shared tradition of surrender to the divine that binds all believers, across time and space. Indeed, whether it is the Qur'anic verse, "Your religion is that of your father Abraham; he named you Muslims" (Quran 22:78), or the divine proclamation, "Today, I have perfected your religion for you, completed my blessing upon you, and have chosen Islam as your religion" (Quran 5:3), these scriptures highlight a profound truth. As followers of Prophet Muhammad, the beacon of Islam, we are not starting a new spiritual journey. Rather, we find ourselves at the axis of a vast continuum of prophetic tradition; we are not the originators of a new spiritual dawn.

This insight was not unfamiliar to the communities of the earlier prophets. The Quran tells a compelling story of Prophet Jacob nearing his earthly end, questioning his sons about whom they would worship in his absence. United in their response, they pledged to venerate the God of their ancestors - Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac - the One and Only, committing to continue in their path as Muslims (Quran 2:133).

This depiction of Islam as more than just a 'new' religion positions it as an extension and fulfilment of a monotheistic legacy that threads through the accounts of all earlier prophetic eras. This concept expands our understanding of our spiritual lineage and identity, highlighting the enduring divine narrative echoing throughout human history. We are woven into a larger story, a tale of grand dimensions that reaches back to the earliest human consciousness, enriching our perception of what it means to be a 'Muslim.' It is seen not just as a religious denomination but as a timeless spiritual state connecting us in an everlasting dialogue with the Divine.

The Quranic injunctions, "He has named you Muslims" (Quran 22:78) and "I have chosen Islam as your religion" (Quran 5:3), resonate deeply, as they reveal a profound truth - those who follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammad are to recognize their faith by no other name than 'Islam'. This is not a fleeting designation, but a name of divine origin, a weighty mantle of responsibility that they are privileged to bear.

The word 'Muslim' suffices in delineating their identity, an identity that is imbued with the same divine essence that marked the lives of countless prophets and their followers throughout the annals of time. If, at any point, the disciples of Muhammad seek to extricate the message of their Prophet from the broader framework of the prophetic tradition, or if they lean on any identity other than 'Muslim', they risk straying from the foundational essence of their faith.

Being a 'Muslim' means being part of a vast, spiritual tapestry woven through the centuries by a myriad of prophetic voices echoing the same divine message. Any diversion from this understanding does more than just compromise the integrity of their faith—it risks cutting off their link to this rich spiritual lineage. Thus, 'Islam' is not just a name; it is a testament to a divine directive, an enduring identity, and a bond

that unites all followers of Muhammad to the unbroken chain of prophets who have walked the path of monotheism before them.

A jurisprudential mind might find itself bewildered when navigating the sacred verses of the Quran in search of a definitive image of a Hanif Muslim. The scriptural landscape is noticeably devoid of legalistic explanations or narratives. On the contrary, the scripture's core is the concept of surrendering oneself unconditionally to the Divine Singular Entity. This surrender is expected to be so immersive and profound that all identities - be it ethnic, national, or geographical - seem to dissolve into the Divine essence, the "colour of Allah" {صبغته الله}: (Baqarah:138). There is a recurring motif throughout the Quranic text, appealing to believers to abandon sectarian and group identities, presented in various stylistic forms. The scripture, rather than providing restrictive boundaries, encourages a boundless immersion in the Divine. The Quranic instruction to be "Rabbaniyoon", or those wholly devoted to God, is not simply a commandment but a beckoning, inviting the fragmented factions of the People of the Book to embrace the path of the "Hanif" Muslim and tread the communal footsteps of Abraham. This sacred text explicitly asserts that revered figures- Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and other luminaries from noble lineages - held no affiliation to what was then the prevailing Judaic tradition. Nor did they ever express a desire to be labelled as Jews or Christians.

To illuminate this complex tapestry of religious identification, the Quran provides a touchstone. It elucidates that those choosing to embark on the Abrahamic path are recognized by God as beings committed to unswerving obedience. When examined alongside "Kunu Rabbaniyoon" and "Sibghatullah" - the concept of embodying God's 'colour' or

essence - it becomes vividly clear that God, the Sovereign of all nations, yearns for the emergence of a global society.

This would be a society where the demarcations of religious, national, geographical, and ethnic identities are transcended by a universal commitment to God. It speaks to the creation of an environment where all these identifiers are enfolded into a shared identity - one formed not by superficial markers, but by the profound act of submission and devotion to the Divine.

In a bid to crystallize the notion of a 'Muslim' as viewed through the Quran's lens, it's crucial to acknowledge the encompassing concept of 'Ummah', the collective of the faithful. The Abrahamic supplication "رَبَّنَا وَاجْعَلْنَا مُسْلِمِينَ لَكَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِنَا أُمَّةً مُسْلِمَةً { } لَكَ" - And make us [submissive] unto You and of our descendants a community [in submission] unto You" (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:128), fosters an understanding that integrates the followers of previous prophets and their true disciples into the Islamic Ummah. On the other hand, those who have inherited their connections to these prophets, either culturally or ethnically, but have deviated from the track of unconditional surrender to God, the divine dictum is unambiguous: "لا ينال عهدي الظالمين" - My covenant does not include the wrongdoers" (Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:124). Thus, the Quranic narrative suggests that simply maintaining a nominal affiliation with a Muslim faction or a distinct follower set is insufficient to perpetuate one's Muslim identity. Rather, this identity demands an active embodiment of faith, a commitment that is manifest in one's actions. Absent this, the Abrahamic prayer wouldn't logically exclude those born into the realm of truth seekers but have since, due to their transgressions, become ineligible for the blessings designated for the Muslim Ummah.

In the grand tapestry of human history, whenever prophets have appeared heralding the message of piety, their call for total

devotion has been akin to a lighthouse, casting a captivating glow of pure surrender to an Ultimate Being. This transformative journey of unmitigated servitude towards a sole Divinity often transcends a common, definable character, proving elusive even to those who are engrossed in its sublime embrace. When we identify various faiths today such as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and others, we must remember that these labels were not conferred by the prophets or spiritual pioneers traditionally linked to the inception of these religious doctrines. Their teachings were, in essence, an invitation to a profound experience rather than a named tradition. Consider Judaism as an example. The genesis of Judaism cannot be dated back earlier than the First Century BCE, as recorded in Second Maccabees. The term 'Iudaismos', a Greek term, was first used to denote a community striving to safeguard their Jewish essence against the encroaching wave of Hellenism.² This group, facing the threat of their cultural identity being swallowed by the Greek way of life, clung tighter to their Jewish roots. This set the foundation for a concept that, after countless centuries, we now recognize as Judaism. This endeavour was less about inaugurating a new faith and more about asserting and sustaining their distinctive identity and fundamental values amidst a transformative era.³

Christianity, a faith boasting the largest following globally, did not abruptly emerge as a separate entity from Judaism during Jesus's time. According to the narratives within the New Testament, Jesus's mission, grounded in his own pronouncements, was not to inaugurate an entirely new faith but to purify and rejuvenate Judaism. Without the fervent evangelism of Saint Paul, it's doubtful whether Christianity could have evolved as a distinct religious identity from Judaism.

Intriguingly, the first recipients of the labels 'Christian' or 'Nazarene' did not readily adopt these terms. The epithet

'Christian' is believed to have first been used mockingly in Antioch, targeting the followers of Christ. Initially, they rejected this label, opting instead to present themselves as a reformist sect within Judaism.⁴ Yet, around a century after the death of Jesus, a pivotal event occurred. A disciple named Ignatius was martyred in the very city of Antioch. This event endowed him with the emblematic status of a 'Christian' martyr. Ignatius, recognized for initiating the tradition of 'Imitatio Christi' — the practice of living the Christian life — reshaped the concept of 'Christianity'. It was no longer merely a divergent Jewish identity but was seen as enriching and even surpassing it. This evolving perspective played a substantial role in establishing Christianity as a popular religious identity.

In light of this, it becomes evident that these religions did not simply pop into existence overnight but are the culmination of a gradual, lengthy evolution shaped by the changing tides of history, cultural shifts, and socio-political transformations.⁵

In the diverse tapestry of global faiths, it is fascinating to consider how they have morphed from broad theistic inclinations into more definitive religious structures. They were required to embrace unique appellations. Contemplate, for instance, how without the Arab nomenclature for 'Hinduism', we may have struggled to name the complex array of religions woven into the fabric of the Indian subcontinent. Both in India and China, a myriad of unique, often contrasting, religious and cultural ideologies have been packaged into neat labels such as 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', 'Jainism', 'Confucianism', and 'Taoism'. These terms are convenient for our referencing but fail to truly reflect the multifaceted realities embedded in these traditions. It is vital to note that these categories, comfortably assigned for our ease, are not necessarily the self-proclaimed identities of these communities.

Consider Sikhism, for example. As Nanak first articulated his devotional hymns, it was unlikely he anticipated his fledgling teachings, later shaped by Guru Gobind Singh, would solidify into the distinct faith we now recognise as Sikhism. It was probably beyond his envisioning that his followers, in the centuries to follow, would adopt such identifiable external symbols that they would stand apart significantly from other theistic groups. The constant transformation of these faiths highlights that religious identities are not set in stone. They are, instead, continuously moulded and remoulded by the interaction of societal, political, and historical forces, a living testament to the dynamism of human spirituality.

The followers of Muhammad hold a unique distinction within the global cultural fabric: they claim their identity as 'Muslims', and their faith is known by the divinely-derived term 'Islam'. Regardless of the political and ideological storms they've weathered, they have steadfastly declined to adopt any other name. This commitment to their chosen label remained resolute even during the era of colonial influence when orientalist attempted to rename Islam as 'Mohammedanism'. Muslims took stern exception to this, unyieldingly upholding the name of their faith as 'Islam'.

Nonetheless, it's an intriguing paradox that the contemporary Muslim mindset appears to reflect more of a 'Muhammad-centric' faith or a community of 'Muhammad's followers' than the divine attribution of Islam. It's as if they've fallen into a misunderstanding of treating Islam as just one more religion, engaging in interfaith dialogues on such shaky grounds. This shift is indicative of a broader intellectual erosion that has unfolded in the wake of the tribulations experienced by the Muslim community, leading it towards a disproportionately Muhammad-focused orientation, rather than a commitment to the divine wisdom inherent in Islam. For Muslims, a significant

shift in perception is needed, one that requires them to step beyond the Muhammad-centric mindset. Frequently, they conceive of Islam as another organized religion, a firm system of rituals and beliefs akin to others. This particular worldview poses a barrier, preventing them from discerning an essential truth - their vocation transcends the mere role of followers. They have been chosen for the sacred stewardship of Islam, the only path of devotion with divine sanction, an obligation persisting till the last breath of history. Hence, any dialogue with other faiths is not an ordinary exchange, but an invitation extended towards a divine path.

Expressed differently, to truly understand the heart of Islam, Muslims need to redefine their identity. They must see themselves not merely as adherents but as custodians of an expansive Muslim community, the Ummah. This community is not confined to contemporary followers, but embraces the succession of past prophets and their devout followers. By acknowledging this vast continuum of the Ummah, they can trace the vibrant threads of connection to the genesis of all faiths.

The spirit of Islam, with its core encapsulated in an intense, unconditional submission, defies being hemmed in by the conventional frameworks of jurisprudence or theology. This overarching surrender, which is central to Islam, resists easy categorization by the typical vernacular of theological or jurisprudential expression. The Quran, in its profound wisdom, adopts varied approaches to highlight the innate qualities of Muslims. At times, it draws upon the commendable narratives from past societies, while in other instances, it aligns with the ethos of the primordial monotheistic faith, the "deen-e-hanif", presenting it as a guidepost for adherents of Islam.

Consider, for instance, the story of the Companions of the Cave. Their unwavering faith in monotheism not only brought

them divine guidance but also morphed them into an emblem of God's protection and providence. Their chronicle continues to inspire generations of believers, offering enduring lessons in faith and steadfastness.⁶ Narratives such as these, coupled with accounts of previous prophets, essentially serve as timeless memorials to virtuous souls who have, across the corridors of history, emerged as beacons of committed devotion.

In the divine scripture of the Quran, we see a universe of narratives unfurling, a vivid tapestry woven from various threads of primordial monotheism. These narratives offer glimpses of different faces of faith, urging the followers of Muhammad to see the path of obedience not as a cold, mechanical journey marked by formulaic deeds but as an evolving, living process that adapts its form to the specific landscapes of time and space. From prophets and messengers to the devoted disciples that followed them, the manifestations of their religious lives may have differed widely. But at their heart, they all resonate with the same melody of profound devotion. Yet, the Quran, in its wisdom, also punctuates this tableau with a word of caution: the ghost of extremism, that has so often haunted the annals of religious history, leading well-meaning devotion astray into the maze of confusion.

This can be seen in the case of the proposed grand mosque at the resting place of the Companions of the Cave. On the surface, it seems to be an act of homage, but history stands witness to the subtle metamorphosis of such memorials. They become seeds sown within the soil of divine faith, gradually sprouting into new identities, and giving birth to splinter sects. It's easy to forget, amid these differences, our shared kinship with all virtuous souls who have walked the path of 'deen-e-hanif' and remained unswervingly on the path of guidance.

In other words, these secondary, sectarian identities can create a tunnel vision that obscures the broad horizons of our

spiritual vista. We risk being caught in a psychological trap of a cult or group, allowing our communal identities to eclipse our divine calling. This insular view prevents us from realizing the inherent universalism of Islam and hampers our ability to engage in enriching dialogue with other faith traditions.

Who Holds the Centre God or Muhammad

THE QURAN, IN ITS IRREFUTABLE wisdom, paints us as participants in a community oriented toward the divine, a community that gives due reverence to all prophets without prejudice: "{We make no distinction between any of His messengers}" (Quran 2:285). Islam, as we perceive it, is not the exclusive domain of those who follow Muhammad, but rather a shared spiritual inheritance of all prophets.⁷ It is a Rabbani (divinely inspired) identity that we bear, not a purely Mohammadi one. Our philosophical compass is set by 'Sibghat Allah' (the Colour of Allah - Quran 2:138), indicating our aspiration to walk God's path.

During the times when Muslims embraced this divine-oriented identity, their broad-mindedness and far-sighted vision preserved their position of leadership among the nations of the world. However, when ideological confusion led them to view themselves solely as the Ummah of Muhammad, their relationship of leadership with other faith communities began to wane. We must remember that the construction of cults is, in fact, a form of idolatry, whether those cults revolve around the Youth of the Cave or borrow their structures from Jewish or Christian identities.

The Qur'an emphatically repudiates the concept that the true followers of God should embrace a sectarian outlook. Confronted with the declaration, "{And they say, 'Be Jews or Christians [so] you will be guided.'}" (Quran 2:135), the Qur'an responds with resounding clarity: "{Say, 'Rather, [we follow] the religion of Abraham, inclining toward truth...'}" (Quran 2:135). This articulates that identifying oneself as a Jew, Christian, or even as a Muslim confined by national borders, holds no real weight in the divine scheme. It suggests that any endeavour to foster sectarian divides within the pristine religion of monotheism is not only fruitless but antithetical to the essence of faith. Indeed, the Qur'an warns, "Indeed, those who have divided their religion and become sects - you, [O Muhammad], are not [associated] with them in anything. Their affair is only [left] to Allah; then He will inform them about what they used to do." (Quran 6:159). This firmly underscores the vanity of such divisions, while emphasizing the preeminent importance of a unified, monotheistic faith transcending temporal and spatial boundaries.

In the evocative verses of the Holy Qur'an, we are asked to reflect on the question: "Who is better in religion than one who yields his whole self to God, does good, and follows the way of Abraham, the upright in Faith?" (Qur'an 4:125). Here, we see Abraham, a man whom God Himself proclaimed as a friend, emerging as the quintessential model of a Hanif Muslim - the very embodiment of monotheistic purity. For those who aspire to follow in Abraham's steps, treading the path of unswerving devotion, the Qur'an challenges the relevance of clinging to the labels of Judaism, Christianity, or even Muhammadanism. Paradoxically, these religious badges, while seemingly connecting to revered prophetic traditions, contradict the sacred identity that the Qur'an bestows upon its followers.

In the Qur'anic discourse, this divinely accorded identity is eloquently referred to as "the colouring of Allah" (Sibghat Allah) - a symbolic expression denoting complete submission to God, reminiscent of Abraham's virtuous life and intimate friendship with the Divine. In essence, the Qur'an, through these intricate verses, advocates for an identity rooted not in the individuality of prophets, but in the richness of one's commitment and righteousness before God.

In the Qur'an's narrative, prophets from around the world have always advocated for the Rabbani concept, a state of godliness. It is inconceivable that a prophet, graced with knowledge, wisdom, and divine guidance, would call upon his followers to worship him rather than God. Instead, he would utter the command, "Be Rabbaniyeen" (3:79), which translates to "Adopt godliness". Contradicting this would be a direct violation of the prophetic mission. As the Qur'an ponders, "Would you advocate disbelief after you have submitted to God?" (3:80). Such an identity, rooted in the prophet, the nation, or the sect, stands in stark opposition to the divine identity, the state of being Rabbani. The Qur'an likens this form of sectarianism to polytheism. All nations harbour the desire to establish a symbol of their identity that ties their people to their national ethos. Around the world, every nation moulds an icon of national pride, an axis upon which the wheel of societal life continues to turn.

In the era of Moses, the Jewish people, finding themselves in a vacuum created by their leader's absence, sought to solidify their national identity through the worship of the Golden Calf. They became ensnared in a dangerous misconception that they were God's chosen, His beloved offspring. This misguided belief veered them towards the assumption that they were immune from God's wrath or if faced, it would only be for a brief period, a "few numbered days". They lost sight of the fact that their

chosen status was not an end unto itself, but a means, an invitation to become conduits of divine revelation to the world.

The parallels to the believers of the Qur'anic era are startling. Should they regard their privileged position as the 'best of nations' as a badge of national honour, and fall prey to the same intellectual deception that mere affiliation with the community of Muhammad guarantees their salvation, then they too would have allowed the steadfast mountain of divine obligation to slip through their fingers. Just like the Children of Israel, they would have misplaced the actual purpose of their selection, which was to shoulder the burden of divine guidance, becoming bearers of revelation rather than mere recipients. They, too, would be at risk of straying from the path of true godliness and 'Rabbanism'.

As we gaze upon the heavenly constellation of prophets as it is illustrated in Islam, we recognize that the luminary we know as Muhammad, 'the Messenger of Allah', shines not alone but is an integral part of this celestial assembly. The identity, which Islam fosters, is no less than a shared inheritance of all prophets and a nexus of their teachings.⁸ Statements excessively elevating the status of Muhammad such as 'the chief of all prophets' or 'the most esteemed among the prophets' are conspicuously absent from the Quranic discourse. The Quran, with its verse, "Those messengers - We favoured some of them over others" (2:253), does nothing more than lift the veil on a historical reality: God had graced some prophets with His discourse, while others were bestowed with higher ranks. Take, for instance, Jesus, the son of Mary, who was blessed with clear signs and strengthened with the Holy Spirit. Yet, despite this recognition, the unique honour accorded to Abraham, his steadfastness in monotheism, and the singular distinction of being chosen by God as a friend, as encapsulated in "And Allah took Abraham as an intimate friend" (4:125), do not lose their

prominence. Islam, in its wisdom, acknowledges the intricate hierarchy among prophets while cherishing each prophet's unique contribution in their epoch and upholding the unity of their core message - monotheism.

Each star in this celestial assembly of prophets is distinct, yet they form a coherent whole, illuminating a path for the seekers of faith. They all carry a unique divine identity, the characteristic beacon for the faithful. However, those who, under the influence of excessive devotion or tribal sentiment, formed communities around the identity of their prophets, whether Jewish, Christian, or those who in contemporary times misinterpret followers of Muhammad as 'the Muhammadan community', should be reminded of a Quranic truth: "Muhammad is no more than a messenger: many were the messengers that passed away before him. If he died or was slain, will you then turn on your heels?" (Quran 3:144). The Eternal's Being is what endures and suffices as a reference for us all.

Jesus, hailed in peace, was a prophet dispatched for the rejuvenation of the Jews. Yet, when his own persona was co-opted as the pivot of a fresh national identity, the Christian faith took shape as a distinct, oppositional entity diverging from Judaism. Any foundational principles of a group, irrespective of whether they reference a prophet or a saint, if they extend beyond the monotheistic doctrine, they contravene the "Divine Colour" - the natural disposition in which humankind was created.

Today's Muslim identity, which is overwhelmingly Muhammadan than Divine, and where emblems and inscriptions not only suffice with the name of Muhammad alongside Allah but, depending on the individual's ability and religious enthusiasm, are also thought to require the names of the four caliphs or the Panchatan, the holy five (Mohammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Hussain). This presents a tailored

identity of modern ethnic Muslims for which no justification can be provided from the scriptures and traditions of the faith.

In the fledgling generations of Muhammad's disciples, as they held onto their divine identities, they saw themselves as carrying the beacon of the Abrahamic faith and safeguarding the heritage of all former prophets. Their evolution flowed steadily like a perennial river. The wayward communities of mankind, remnants of preceding prophets, found themselves irresistibly drawn to this divine movement set in motion by the last Prophet. It seemed to the ordinary people as though the gates of this divine mission were ajar, invitingly.

Not designed to champion the ascendancy or superiority of a particular group or nation, this movement had within its vastness a promise of redemption for the global human family. The call to unconditional servitude to the One God threaded the diverse tapestry of humanity into a fraternal bond. The march of the devout, encompassing all prophets and their genuine disciples, was a clarion call for human unity that reverberated in the hearts of all sentient beings.

The desert-dwelling Arabs who composed the first generation of Muhammad's followers embarked on an extraordinary journey, driven by a profound shift in identity. They transcended their tribal and ethnic affiliations and wholeheartedly embraced a universal, Divine identity. It was this commitment that propelled them to bear the revolutionary message of their faith across a myriad of territories and cultures, from Arabian lands to beyond, across the northern and southern expanses. Their reception was remarkable. Ordinary people, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, began to see these erstwhile nomads as their deliverers, as harbingers of a new spiritual dawn. It did not matter that these messengers spoke a different tongue or practiced an unfamiliar way of life; such differences dissolved in the face of their mission.

The Arabic language and the desert-born lifestyle that the messengers brought with them became the common ground rather than a point of division. Barriers of language, culture, and geography started to blur, and the divisive lines of ethnicity began to fade. The prospect of belonging to this divine movement offered the same opportunities and hopes of salvation to all - whether Arab or non-Arab.

These standard-bearers of a shared prophetic tradition stood for the establishment of a Divine society that encompassed the entire world. The paradigm they embodied in those initial days transcended any singular cultural dominance and evaded any hints of imperial ambition. The first-generation followers of Muhammad, through their conduct, continuously negated the idea of empire-building, instead promoting a vision of a shared global community founded on faith.

However, as time ebbed away, the illuminating beacon of the Quranic message, a call to the unity of all humanity, gradually lost its brightness, casting only a diffused glow. The Divine discourse began to be perceived through the lens of Arab culture, like a universal script being read in a regional dialect. Our intellectual guardians started to identify the Muslim culture as an organic offshoot of the Quranic intellectual landscape. They asserted that the interests of Islam could not be decoupled from the fortunes of the Muslim nations.

Arab culture, once a part of a multifaceted tapestry, assumed a singular status and became a de facto communal identity. Non-Arabs, once equal partners in this divine movement, found themselves consigned to the periphery, reluctantly accepted as affiliates.

The shift was subtle but profound: familial pride, ethnic superiority, and Arab tribalism began to overshadow the Divine message. The vibrant spectrum of the 'Colour of Allah' started to fade, its hues diminishing into a monochromatic palette.

Pitted against other nations, Muslim nationalism began to assert itself, creating a unique yet insular identity. Other threads from the Prophetic lineage and additional cohorts of spiritual pilgrims began to sense a growing disconnect from this evolving Muslim narrative.

With the passage of time, individuals who had obstinately held onto their Jewish or Christian identities following the rise of Prophet Muhammad found themselves steeped in their own parochial perspectives and sectarian affiliations. Yet, the advent of a new wave of Muslim nationalism began to envelop even those within the Rabbaniyyin fold, causing them to be unduly influenced by the mindset of the Mohammedan group. An unfortunate shift of perception occurred, where an Apostle, sent as a mercy for all of humanity, was gradually reduced to a national deliverer for Muslims.

This transformation did not occur in isolation. Before long, a similar trend emerged within the advocates of monotheism, mimicking the patterns of previous nations, where an identity began to solidify based solely around their Prophet. The Ummah, a community once priding itself on championing the unity of humanity and envisaging themselves as the logical culmination of all prophetic teachings, sadly began to see themselves merely as followers of Muhammad.

This narrow perspective served not only to alienate them from the universal spirit of prophethood, but also sowed the seeds of numerous misconceptions and false hopes concerning the afterlife within their belief system. Their doctrines soon became littered with a multitude of unfounded beliefs, casting them into a self-created labyrinth of illusions.⁹

Where better to seek an understanding of the profound mission of Muhammad, the Prophet of Allah, than the revered pages of the Quran itself? This enduring text, meticulously preserved and reverently handed down through countless

generations, does not entertain the notion of an 'Ummah Muhammadiyah'. Instead, the Quran paints a picture of the Prophet Muhammad as a revitalizing force within the Abrahamic tradition, embodying its purest form in contrast to other communities within the People of the Book.

As the concept of 'Ummah Muhammadiyah' evolved, it represented less of a community adhering to the divine "Colour of Allah", and more of a nation gearing up for domination, made up of the remnants of Prophet Muhammad's followers. Other nations, understandably, found little resonance in the potential political ascendancy or worldwide leadership of this Ummah.

As history unfolded, the grandeur of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires, the rise of the Ummah Muhammadiyah in Spain and Delhi, and the global expansion under the Ottoman Turks - all seemed to embolden the perception that the Ummah Muhammadiyah sought to assert its political, military, and cultural superiority over others.

Yet, while the geographical boundaries of Muslim empires continually expanded, and the glow of knowledge and art in the Arab-Muslim cultural centre intensified, these progenies of Muhammad's followers found themselves in a paradoxical intellectual and spiritual regression. Having strayed from the prophetic mission, their leaders revelled in their own power, intoxicated by their self-perceived importance. An emerging sectarian mindset resulted in internecine strife among Muslims. Those who were once advocates for the unity of humanity were now caught up in bloody conflicts rooted in sectarian identities like Shia-Sunni and Hanafi-Shafi'i.

As events unfolded, the once mighty edifice of the Umayyad Dynasty crumbled, and the shining beacon that was the Abbasid Dynasty gradually dimmed into obscurity. Amidst this tumultuous backdrop, the Muslim Ummah fragmented ideologically, fracturing into factions so divergent that it became

increasingly challenging to discern the righteous and the true followers of the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.

While scholars and intellectuals continuously grappled with the notion that somewhere along the historical narrative, a grave misstep was made - a step that seemingly drew us further away from our intended destination with each passing moment, every effort towards reformation seemed predominantly focused on the pursuit of dominance and ascendancy for the Muslim community.

Regrettably, little attention was devoted to a broader vision that was lost - the concept of a divine community, which now drives us to think in divisive, sectarian terms, breeding parochial, group-centric outcomes. Thus, it begs the question, how do we breathe new life into this inclusive, universal perspective that once defined us?

The withdrawal from the expansive, cosmic viewpoint of the Muslim Ummah, and the delineation of the Ummah of Muhammad's novel intellectual spaces, were indicative of a backward stride, both psychologically and intellectually. This swiftly relegated future generations of Muhammad's followers to the peripheries of power. There is a pressing need for the current generation of Muslims to reignite their grasp of the lofty station of prophethood, filling their hearts and minds with this transformative insight: they serve as the guardians of the 'mercy to all worlds,' the pivot of all prophetic movements, tasked with the universal welfare and salvation of mankind until time's end. As long as this awareness is not fully actualized, they will continue to be held captive within the psychological boundaries crafted by the Ummah of Muhammad.

Faith Identity & Divine Surrender

IN THE LABYRINTH OF HISTORY, communities tracing their lineage to ancient prophets—Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Sabians, or proponents of other monotheistic branches—are but waypoints on humanity's spiritual odyssey. These identities spring from the same sacred quest: adherence to Islam, a steadfast path demanding complete submission to Allah's will. Yet there are those who see Islam not as an existential leap of faith but as a cultural or national identity, who contend that the path to enlightenment necessitates the embrace of their specific communal identity. These individuals would do well to reflect upon the Quranic verse that affirms: "Indeed, the guidance of Allah is the (only) guidance" (6:70). It suggests that true spiritual navigation lies in the Divine orientation alone, a principle that echoed in the lives of all preceding prophets and their dedicated followers, without the need to raise high the banner of 'be Jews or Christians'." Those individuals who equate religious belief with their national identity often insist that true faith cannot be realized without adopting the hue of their specific sect. A significant testament to this mindset was present in the Jewish and Christian communities during the period of Quranic revelation, where the prospect of spiritual salvation outside their own denominational circles was deemed virtually impossible. In response to such hardened sectarianism, the

Quran deemed it necessary to caution the followers of Muhammad, by stating: "And the Jews will not be pleased with you, nor the Christians until you follow their religion" (2:120). In the Divine scheme of things, spiritual enlightenment does not hinge upon one's affiliation with the Jews, the Christians, or even the integration into Muslim nationalistic circles. The crux of enlightenment truly lies in embracing and enacting the universal guidance that has been bequeathed to all of us, as encapsulated in the command: "And it is enjoined upon us that we submit to the Lord of all the worlds" (6:71).

Indeed, those committed to the spiritual path have an imperative, a necessity, to ascend above all tribal and sectarian affiliations, small and large, and concentrate their devotion towards the Singular Divine, the Unifying Presence. In doing so, they emulate the essence of the phrase "So set your face towards the religion, inclining to truth" (30:30), which becomes their spiritual beacon, guiding their journey towards enlightenment. If achieved, they find themselves aligned with the fundamental laws that govern human existence, laws inscribed in the very fabric of our being by the Divine.

This unchanging divine blueprint, immutable and timeless as it is, represents the core essence of our human nature: "There is no altering (the laws of) Allah's creation." (30:30). This is the epitome of an upright faith, yet its profundity is often out of reach, eluding the grasp of "most people" (30:30).

And then there are those who splinter their faith, cleaving into factions, lost in the labyrinth of their own creations. Their existence is confined within the walls of self-satisfaction, consumed by the myopic view of their own possessions. This blinkered perspective restricts their ability to appreciate the true profundity of the upright faith, a faith that provides assurance of prosperity, both in this life and the next.

True monotheism, authentic in its devotion, establishes an orchestration of harmony between the individual and the majestic canvas of the cosmos. This orchestration fosters a profound awareness of the universe's obedience, whether willingly or reluctantly (3:83), to the laws of the same Creator they are privileged to worship. It is a gentle reminder of the consistency and continuity of the cosmic order, an order guided by an unchangeable divine tradition. The echoes of monotheism, or Tawhid, reverberate with a dual effect. Firstly, it provides an escape hatch from the labyrinth of sectarian segregation, liberating the human spirit. Secondly, it acts as a lantern, casting a beam of enlightenment on the enigmatic workings of the cosmos, elucidating its mysteries and the divine regulations that infuse the universe with cohesion, harmony, and deliberate purpose. As the faithful voyager navigates deeper into this cosmic marvel, they are gradually awash with an intensified cognizance that each fragment of creation resonates with a purpose, underscoring the divine tenet that nothing in this universe has been forged aimlessly.

Adopting a path of undiluted faith is rarely an effortless task. The history of religious aberrations paints a vivid picture: fragmentation of faith and factionalism among followers emerge in close connection with religious principles themselves. This shift is often so discreet, infiltrating our consciousness so quietly, that we remain oblivious to our gradual ideological recession.

Consider the case of the Jews, once seen as custodians of a meticulously cautious religious life, adhering rigorously to every intricate nuance of jurisprudence in their worship rituals. Yet, they failed to recognize their inadvertent slip into a form of tribal vanity, departing from their solid footing on God's Immutable Mountain. Lured by the ego-stroking notion of

being the 'children of God' and the 'chosen ones', they strayed from the pathway of true obedience.

Their professed piety, therefore, resembles the sentiment expressed in the words of Jesus Christ - they carefully strained out a gnat but readily swallowed a camel. This vivid metaphor suggests a profound disconnect between the religious minutiae they meticulously observed and the overarching, essential principles they tragically overlooked.

The propensity of religious adherents to elevate their communal identities and prophetic devotion to the level of idolatry, as reflected in religious history, reveals a troubling pattern. The focus of their fervour and effort becomes increasingly insular, confined to the advancement of their own community or nation. The Quran poignantly captures such a circumstance: "The Jews say, 'The Christians stand on nothing [of substance],' and the Christians say, 'The Jews stand on nothing [of substance],'" (2:113). These contests of nationalistic hubris unfold among those who are ostensibly well-versed in God's word.

National pride and sectarian prejudice have formed an impassable barrier for the People of the Book, leading them to reject the final divine revelation. They have encountered this message as intimately as a father recognizes his son, yet they chose denial. "Those to whom We gave the Scripture recognize it as they recognize their own sons" (2:146). Their refusal to recognize this underscores a failure to understand that loyalty to ancestral traditions should not obstruct the path to universal truth.

Just as alterations to the natural laws - the Divine Law - would cause a seismic shift in the harmonious operations of the universe, so too would an incorrect interpretation of the path of worship, or 'Al-Deen', have the potential to wreak havoc on human existence. Thus, those who set their sights on the

journey of spiritual enlightenment must be vigilant, ensuring that their understanding of faith remains untainted by personal preferences and capricious desires. The Qur'anic directive, 'Establish religion, and do not cause division therein', serves as a profound lesson for Muhammad's followers: they are to persist on the uncompromising and unambiguous path of complete devotion, or 'Al-Deen'. They must actively guard against the risk of division caused by a myriad of interpretations of religion, which could divert them from the righteous path. Failure to do so would not only jeopardize their connection with the Divine and the universe, but it would also lead them astray from their destined role in the grand scheme of things.

A human's self-realization is a prerequisite to their understanding of the cosmic order and the awe-inspiring divinity. The Quran refers to the universe's fundamental framework as 'Sirat Allah' or 'God's Path'. This understanding of 'Sirat Allah' imbues travellers on the Straight Path with a unique self-assuredness, a trait inherent in the inquisitive and the ambitious.

The Quran articulates this nexus between man and the cosmos, stating: "Indeed, you guide to a Straight Path. The Path of God, to whom belongs everything in the heavens and everything on the earth. Surely, all matters are destined to return to God" (42:53). Prophets throughout time have strived to ignite humanity's awareness of their true stature and pointed towards the Straight Path, an assurance of guidance spanning both worlds.

The invocation 'Guide us to the Straight Path', which still reverberates in the sanctuaries of Muhammad's followers, symbolizes a continuation of the prophetic mission, steered by different prophets at different times. Statements regarding Prophet Abraham: 'And We guided him to the Straight Path' (16:121), and the monotheistic call of Jesus: 'Indeed, Allah is my

Lord and your Lord, so worship Him. This is the Straight Path' (19:36), or the Quran's account of various prophets from Abraham's lineage: 'And We chose them and guided them to a Straight Path' (6:87), underline this. The honour of walking the Straight Path is not exclusive to Muhammad's followers; all prophets and their true followers throughout history have embarked on this journey.

It seems out of place then, for those traversing the same path to veer apart. To them, the divine injunction should suffice: 'And this is My Path, which is straight, so follow it; and do not follow other paths, lest they scatter you from His Path. This He has ordained for you, that you may become righteous' (6:153).

Communities that trace their spiritual lineage to ancient prophets or that find their inspiration in the teachings of Muhammad, Prophet of Allah, alongside those seekers whose narratives are documented in the Quran, as well as those whose stories remain untold, all share an unspoken kinship. They are all inheritors of a singular divine message and parts of the same spiritual trajectory, under the leadership of varying prophets, carried out through the ages and across diverse landscapes. Any ostensible conflicts between them are no more than shadow plays of perspective and interpretation. It falls upon the followers of Muhammad to dispel the mirage and shed light on the shared truth that encapsulates all - "Allah is my Lord and your Lord, therefore worship Him" (19:36). Should this profound interconnection elude understanding, it must be unequivocally asserted, "Are you disputing with us about God? He is our Lord and yours. We have our deeds, and you have yours. We are sincerely devoted to Him" (2:139).

The bond of faith extends beyond a mutual understanding of the divine - it stretches to embrace an intimate connection with all prophets. In essence, our religious experience remains

unfulfilled without the comprehensive acceptance of each prophet's truth. Those who intend to discriminate among God's messengers, embracing some while dismissing others, are not demonstrating a form of faith that is acceptable in the divine scheme of things. As is vividly articulated by the Quran, "Indeed, those are the true unbelievers" (4:150-151). On the other hand, individuals who profess their faith in God and His messengers, studiously avoiding any hint of favouritism, are indeed the blessed ones. The Quran affirms this by stating, "It is they who will receive their reward" (4:152).

Across the expanse of time, prophets have been inviting mankind to an unwavering and impassioned worship of a single God. Consequently, it would be remiss for the followers of Muhammad not to view these select beings and their devout followers as extensions of their own spiritual enterprise. According to the Quran, every messenger was given the commandment to partake in virtuous acts and consume what is good, all the while conscious that "I am all-knowing of what you do" (23:51). They were also reminded that "Indeed, your community is one community, and I am your Lord, so fear Me" (23:52).

However, what transpired was fragmentation into separate faith traditions, each group immersing themselves in their unique interpretations, breaking the original unity. It is our collective task to approach these disparate expressions of faith not as separate realities, but as varying facets of a singular divine truth, continuously illuminating the path towards our shared spiritual journey.

In the divine schema, monotheism transcends the mere recognition of a singular Supreme Being; it weaves a compelling narrative of unity in humanity. A myriad of factors, including nationalism, tribal identities, deference to particular prophets or religious figures, can splinter the collective human identity into

separate groups. But in contrast, monotheism gathers these disparate shards into a unified whole, endowing them with a sense of divine purpose.

According to the Quran, all prophets, throughout the vast canvas of history, fundamentally called for the unity of faith, unmarred by divisive tendencies - urging people to "establish the religion and do not create divisions within it" (42:13). This call has been, and remains, a guiding light for the followers of Muhammad. The Quran further amplifies this concept by asserting, "He has ordained for you of religion what He enjoined upon Noah and that which We have revealed to you, and what We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus - to establish the religion and not be divided therein" (42:13).

The Quran uses a plethora of methods to communicate to the followers of Muhammad that they have been chosen for divine revelation, much like Noah, subsequent prophets, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their progeny, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon (4:163). The task bestowed upon these prophets, and subsequently to their followers, is to foster unity and camaraderie among humankind, thereby truly embodying the spirit of Monotheism.

To truly grasp the teachings of Muhammad, one is called to embrace a faith that intertwines a deep belief in Allah with a reverent acknowledgement of His divine revelations that came through Muhammad himself. Yet, this call does not stop there. It goes further, beckoning believers to extend this faith to the divine wisdom imparted upon those other towering figures of religious lore - Abraham and his sons, Moses, Jesus, and the litany of other prophets whose stories echo through the ages. In a powerful proclamation of unity, believers express an unwavering stance: "We draw no distinction between any of His messengers; we simply surrender ourselves to His will" (3:84).

This potent denouncement against creating divides among prophets stems from the understanding that such divisions can cause significant ruptures in the foundation of faith. Personal devotion, while innocuous at first glance, can steadily transform into an intrusive force, capable of shifting one's focus away from the bedrock principles of their faith. This form of idolatry can escalate, eventually spawning manifold interpretations of religion, leaving one estranged from the true essence of their faith, often referred to as Al-Din.

Muslim Ummah or Muhammadan Community?

THE QURANIC TERM "Ummah Muslimah" is made luminous by a prayer that traces its roots back to the epoch of Abraham. This prayer, "{Our Lord, and make us Muslims [in submission] to You and from our descendants a Muslim nation [in submission] to You}" (Al-Baqarah:128), forms a golden thread that weaves its way back to the defining moment when Abraham was asked to submit, and he responded affirmatively, "{I have submitted [in Islam] to the Lord of the worlds.}"

Yet, the narrative doesn't end here. It continues on its path, casting a light on the legacy of obedience. Abraham and Jacob, standing like lighthouses in the historical tide, passed on this wisdom to their progeny: "{O my sons, indeed Allah has chosen for you this religion, so do not die except while you are Muslims}" (Al-Baqarah:132). In essence, their final breaths should only be drawn within the realm of obedience.

In the twilight of Jacob's life, his mind found its focus on a single point - ensuring an unwavering commitment to obedience from his successors. Thus, he sought confirmation from his children as his life ebbed away. Their response, "{We will worship your God and the God of your fathers, Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac - one God. And we are Muslims [in

submission] to Him}" (Al-Baqarah:133), echoes back to the Abrahamic invocation, resonating with the longing for a Muslim Ummah rising from his descendants.

As illustrated in the Quranic narrative, the Muslim Ummah or community inherently embodies a diverse collective. This group consists of the lineage of the Prophets and their loyal followers, who across time and continents have resolutely upheld the ethos of unconditional obedience. This communion of the obedient, traverses the barriers of time, space, race, language, and geography. By embracing sincere obedience, one is welcomed into the intimate fold of the Divine.

In this caravan of obedience, gender does not stand as an obstacle. As we see in the verse, "O Mary, God has chosen you and purified you; He has chosen you above all the women of the world" (Al-Imran: 42), divinity does not discriminate on the basis of gender. Furthermore, the portrayal of Hazrat Asiya as a role model for generations to come echoes the sentiment that entry into this assembly of the obedient hinges solely on one's deeds. Other affiliations or circumstances hold no bearing - a testament to the universality and inclusivity inherent in the concept of the Muslim Ummah. Thus, for those who insistently propose, "Be ye Jews or Christians" or perceive their connection to the Muhammadan Community as enough for their identity, they are cautioned and urged to embrace the Abrahamic path without reservation. As per the Quran's admonition, "Say: Nay, we follow the faith of Abraham, the upright" (Al-Baqarah: 135).

The act of viewing any Prophet outside the lens of the Muslim Ummah, or attributing to them the markers of Jewish, Christian, or Muhammadan identity, is without ground. In highlighting such, the Quran admonishes the adherents of former prophets, posing the question, "Know ye best, or does God?" (Al-Baqarah: 140).

In essence, attributing sectarian divisions to the prophets is a grievous injustice - a deliberate refusal to acknowledge truth. The Quran states quite emphatically, "And who is more unjust than he who conceals a witness he has from Allah? And Allah is not unaware of what you do" (Al-Baqarah: 140). This indicates that no act of intentional distortion or obfuscation goes unnoticed.

This is the Quran's distinct vision of the Muslim Ummah—a luminous galaxy composed of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the prophetic figures preceding them, and their faithful followers. Much as "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; and those with him" (Al-Fath: 29) are depicted as destined for historical triumph, so too, the community of saintly souls following the path outlined by "Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes" (An-Nisa: 163) together embody the entity we understand as the Muslim Ummah. If someone persists in contending that the Muslim Ummah is exclusive to the Muhammadan community or those tied to it by blood, how could they comfortably excise from this broad fellowship the adherents of the other Abrahamic prophets, or noble figures like Asiya and Mary? It prompts serious reflection, urging us to consider the Muslim Ummah as an inclusive spiritual community, surpassing restrictive bloodlines or sectarian classifications.

In juxtaposition to the people of faith, or the 'Ahl-al-Iman', is a group the Quran refers to as the non-believers, or the 'Ahl-al-Kufr'. These individuals have become so ensnared in their own narrow perspectives that their capacity for noble deeds has been fatally compromised. A single deviation from the embrace of monotheism can ignite an infinite cycle of intellectual and perceptual disarray. Even if they claim lineage from the prophets, should they follow the path of polytheism, they can no longer be counted among the obedient. The Quranic

admonitions "They have certainly disbelieved who say, 'Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary'" (Al-Maidah: 17) and "They have certainly disbelieved who say, 'Allah is the third of three'" (Al-Maidah: 73), underscore that those claiming faith, yet straying from monotheism, cannot cloak their clear disbelief behind euphemistic phrases or legalistic obfuscations. Nor can their assurances of being "We are the children of Allah and His beloved ones" (Al-Maidah: 18) serve as a safety net for their salvation. Contrarily, for those who have steadfastly held onto the tenet of monotheism and remained resolute in their righteous acts, there is no need to succumb to fear or despair.

In the Surah Al-Mu'minun, there's an evocative delineation of the historical prophetic legacy, offering insight into their steadfast faithfulness. It proclaims unambiguously, "Indeed, your community is one community" (Al-Mu'minun: 52). Here is a lineage that stretches from Abraham through Lot, Solomon, Job, Ismail, Idris, Dhul-Kifl, Dhul-Nun, Zakariya, Yahya, and culminating with the virtuous Mary. They form, in essence, a singular religious continuum. Though we may observe fragmentation amongst humanity, the edict "so they divided their affair among them" (Al-Mu'minun: 53) underscores that such divisions are self-imposed. The divine perspective reinforces a unity beyond these splits, and that each individual who performs a virtuous act is recognized as a faithful.

Given such clear elucidation, it becomes untenable to exclude from this monotheistic Ummah the disciples of those prophets who preceded. Ponder upon the Qur'anic portrait of Abraham, painted as an obedient nation unto himself (An-Nahl: 120). Situate this image alongside the statements, "Mankind was a single nation" (Al-Baqarah: 213) and "Indeed, your community is one community". In this tableau, we see the figure of Abraham - a paragon in the caravan of monotheists, whose

unconditional obedience is a benchmark recognized within the Qur'an itself.

A call is made to the faithful, inviting them to nurture within their hearts a faith as profound and steadfast as Abraham's - a faith that transcends facades, embodying sincere servitude to the Creator of the Universe. Those who embrace the Abrahamic tradition, those who walk the path of the ancient prophets, are journeying along a route paved by Prophet Muhammad - a route vividly described in the Torah and the Gospel: "Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find written in what they have of the Torah and the Gospel" (Al-A'raf: 157). In light of this, it seems incongruous for there to arise within this procession of faith smaller, disparate communities. Could it be that these chosen servants of God might yield to the enticements of insular group identities, when such actions risk opening the gates to polytheism?

Immersed in the heart of the Muslim Ummah is an all-embracing perception, a vision that has kept the reverential regard for the vestiges of past prophets alive within the hearts of Muslims. Even in periods of strife, when the companions of the Prophet found themselves at odds with certain groups among the People of the Book, the Quran did not refrain from extolling those virtuous souls that stood out amongst their brethren.

In the heat of a historical moment, when certain factions of Judaism were consistently engaging in disruptive activities during the time of the Quran's revelation, verses such as "Among the People of the Book are some who, if entrusted with a stack of gold, will readily return it. But there are others among them who, if entrusted with a single gold coin, will not repay it unless you constantly demand it..." (Aal-E-Imran: 113) shine a light on the innate goodness of individuals, independent of their communal identities.

Similarly, when the Quran proclaims, "Among the people of Moses is a community which guides by truth and by it establishes justice" (Al-Maidah: 159), it further fortifies the idea that we cannot simply categorize humans into groups of believers and non-believers based solely on their ethnicity.

The Quran's universal message, shaped by the Divine who has affirmed, "Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you" (Al-Hujurat: 13), and who has ensured that "No bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another" (Al-An'am: 164), logically implies that one's ethnic or communal identity cannot and should not eclipse their virtuous deeds.

The comforting message of the Quran is there for all believers, regardless of their cultural origins. As stated, "Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans - those among them who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord; no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve" (Al-Baqarah: 62). Thus, in its boundless wisdom, the Quran continues to be a beacon of hope and unity, transcending divisions of race and the barriers of time.

The verse from the Quran, expanding the realm of spiritual prosperity to encompass the pious from all previous communities, has perpetually provoked profound intellectual exploration amongst some scholars. Perhaps, the heart of this perplexity lies in the increasingly diminished practice of perceiving Prophet Muhammad's mission as a continuation of all previous prophetic teachings. Nonetheless, the Quran persistently instills in us that Muhammad is a proponent of the Abrahamic faith, entrusted with the restoration of the Muslim community and its leadership until the curtain falls on history.

Integral to understanding is the realization that Islam, in its capacity as the ultimate distillation of all prophetic teachings,

orbits around the worship of the One Supreme Being. It is a faith intrinsically cantered on God, where amongst the shimmering galaxy of prophets, no single prophet is elevated above another. True believers in God place their faith in all prophets, without discrimination.

Those who yearn to view Islam as primarily cantered on Muhammad, seem to be under the sway of Christian theologians akin to St. Augustine, whose fervent evangelistic endeavours established Christ as the cornerstone of salvation, thereby confining the concept of salvation within the Christian universe, reserved solely for Christian believers. The Noble Quran, in stark contrast, extricates the concept of salvation from the realm of human debate.

Decisions pertaining to the allocation of places in heaven and hell on the Day of Judgment are delicately nuanced matters, far beyond the capacity of human arbitration. The Quran acknowledges even the People of the Book as natural allies of the Muhammadan faith. As for those whose beliefs have been marred by idolatry, God's directive is unequivocal: the final adjudication of reward or punishment will be executed solely by Him on the Day of Resurrection. The discussion concerning this matter transcends human jurisdiction: "Indeed, Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection" (Al-Hajj: 17).

Just as human ties stretch across a vivid tapestry of tribes and nations for the purpose of mutual understanding— {And We have made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another} (Al-Hujurat:13)—the divine plan equally weaves a pattern where His true followers are known through distinctive religious markers: {And if Allah had willed, He would have made them a single community} (Al-Shura:8). If devotees of different prophets tether themselves to varied strands of divine enlightenment, they must acknowledge the Torah and the

Gospel as threads from the same divine loom, abundant with guidance and light.

Proclaimers of their bond to the prophetic messages should refrain from presuming the right to determine each other's spiritual salvation, or to declare that salvation is solely obtained by becoming Jews or Christians—suggesting a desolate spiritual landscape for anyone beyond this designation. Instead, the Qur'an summons the custodians of prophetic wisdom, those illuminated souls dwelling across cultural spectrums, to set aside the draining task of pointless argumentation and to compete in the more rewarding pursuit of good deeds.

For God, there would have been no obstacle in sculpting all humanity or all factions of the righteous into a single community. But His plan is to put each community through a trial, using the resources bestowed upon them: {But [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good.} (Al-Ma'ida:48).

The pioneering generation of Muslims, aware of Muhammad's eminent position within the prophetic lineage, did not engage in idle conjecture about the destiny of the followers of earlier prophets on the Day of Resurrection. Instead, they remained true to their charge to reach out to the People of the Book, inviting them towards an accord on the foundational truths that bind them: {Say, "O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you - that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah." But if they turn away, then say, "Bear witness that we are Muslims [submitting to Him]."} (Al 'Imran:64).

In their ascendance to champion the cause of humanity, those victorious in this quest bear an innate responsibility: to embrace with open hearts all seekers of truth, leaving wide open the gates of participation in the grand prophetic tradition. This

is the key to discerning the authentic adherents of past prophets from the impostors. Those who are truly in touch with the Divine will answer the call to {hasten towards all that is good} (Al-Ma'ida:48).

For those individuals who tie their hopes of salvation strictly to their Jewish or Christian ancestry, a stark clarification awaits: {Say, O People of the Scripture, you have nothing to stand on unless you uphold the Torah, the Gospel, and what has been sent down to you from your Lord} (Al-Ma'ida:68).

Beware the self-appointed People of the Book, who ensnare themselves in the curse of sectarian bias in religion's name, effectively deifying their own sects. Distance is prudent from these self-proclaimed inheritors of the prophets who bear the marks of idolatry. Their sectarian venom and their narrow, regressive mentality pose a danger of contagion. Hence, the faithful are guided: {O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies; they are but allies to one another} (Al-Ma'ida:51).

However, caution must be exercised to not interpret these verses as blanket statements aimed at all People of the Book. The Qur'an indeed extends an invitation to the remnants of previous prophets to partake in religious observances. It simultaneously anticipates and addresses any potential misconceptions that may germinate in the minds of Muslims: {Among the People of the Scripture is a community who stand [in prayer], recite the verses of Allah during the watches of the night, and they prostrate themselves} (Al 'Imran:113).

In an epoch where the order of human life is being calibrated on the ideals of purity and righteousness, where divisive religious identities, ethnic supremacies, and rigid denominational identities are being systematically dismantled, and where the clarion call is not to mould oneself into Jewish, Christian, or Muslim identities but to embrace the Divine, it

would be unimaginable that the intellectual breadth of the followers of Muhammad might one day contract so considerably that their descendants would come to accept a form of nationalistic identity. Tragically, in this scenario, 'being Muslim' would transition from an existential state to a mere badge of identity.

Regrettably, certain political events and historical factors in the coming years would lay the groundwork for this narrow-minded, bigoted national identity to take root. Narratives meticulously carved from the bedrock of tradition, history, and virtues would swiftly establish a well-entrenched ideological framework. The Muslim Ummah, which saw itself as holding the mantle of leadership until the edge of history, and which used to view the remnants of previous nations through this very leadership lens, would gradually come to see these predecessors as competitors. The formation of this specific psychology within the community of Muhammad did not merely signify an end to a leadership ethos and wide-ranging outlook, but rather left an indelible mark on the Muslim consciousness that they, too, were merely a part of the array of nations.¹⁰ In a manner resonating with the Jews and Christians, the Muslim nation began to weave a tapestry of traditions, steeped in self-glorification and splendour, to assert their superiority over other nations.

The trajectory of such self-assertion reached as far as conjuring narratives which painted an almost effortless entry of Muslims into Paradise on the Day of Judgment, compared to others. This image was often grounded in certain traditions assigning to Muhammad an unprecedented role of intercession, a privilege not shared by other prophets like Abraham. Further narratives suggested that on this decisive day, the standard of praise would solely be held by Muhammad, who would fervently plead on behalf of his Ummah.

These narratives fostered an impression of ordinary Muslims being treated in a manner akin to the Israelite prophets. Such a transformation in the Muslim psyche, in essence, reshaped them from being the carriers of a universal divine message to, ironically, a 'chosen people' themselves, mirroring the title previously bestowed upon other nations in earlier religious contexts.

In the making of narratives to amplify the Muslim Ummah's nationalistic fervour, the profound consequences they would have on the Prophet's own elevated status were inadvertently overlooked. Here we contemplate a Prophet who was sent as a beacon and a warner for the entirety of mankind, whose mercy, as attested by the Quran, enveloped all the worlds, and without whom the entire sweep of human history would be devoid of meaning.

Nonetheless, a peculiar conception of the Prophet began to take hold among Muslims - that of a Prophet who placed his Ummah above the broader world and would exert every ounce of energy on the Day of Judgment for their redemption. When such an idea becomes commonplace, it's hardly surprising that his followers, boxed in by their constructed Muslim identity, feel little motivation to extend their concern to the universal salvation of humanity and to beckon them onto a prosperous path.

The unintended consequence was that the Ummah, once vaunting its position of leadership, found itself retreating into a kind of self-imposed isolation. This retreat, shaped by self-satisfied narratives and optimistic ideations, pushed what was once a leading community into a state of voluntary seclusion, ensnared within the constructs of their own illusions.

Islam: Beyond the History of Muslims

THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE of Muhammad initiated a momentous shift in the narrative of human history. Propelled by divine revelation, history now embarked upon a transformative expedition unprecedented in its scope and significance. The Righteous were filled with an unwavering conviction and total surrender to faith, crafting an atmosphere of unyielding resolve and profound trust. There was a palpable sense that no force could obstruct this historical voyage.

Surveying the historical landscape of the early period, one observes a multitude of vibrant expressions of faith, brimming with freshness and underscored by a towering resolve. Yet, it is vital to acknowledge that history, composed of human experiences and actions, is inevitably shrouded in ambiguities and uncertainties. It cannot be equated with the luminosity of a prophetic message.

Nations that conflate their history with the Prophetic message risk not only closing themselves off from new historical experiences but their evolutionary journey risks spiralling into a paralyzing vortex. They find themselves ensnared in a ceaseless cycle of their own creation, their connection to the living, creative essence of the prophetic message becoming tenuous. Their efforts culminate in an unyielding reverence for the past,

rather than a forward-looking trajectory, embracing the possibilities of the future.

Islam, as a belief system, and Islamic history are two different entities. Yet, regrettably, under the influence of hagiographic history, we often blur the line of this delicate but profound distinction. The history of the early era is indeed the history of those Muslims, some of whom were nurtured by the Prophet himself, or those who experienced the era of these nurtured individuals. There is certainly much for us to gain from this history, but it essentially serves as a reflection of how the first generations of Muslims interpreted and pursued the goals of the Prophetic message in their unique circumstances.

Yet, in the presence of revelation, it's not appropriate for us to elect history over revelation for emulation. This is also due to the fact that not all the aspirations of the Prophetic message were accomplished in the early era. If that were the case, then subsequent history would be rendered meaningless, and future generations would find themselves ensnared in a cycle of insignificance.

Consider this: Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah (Rasulullah), who holds the position of being a bearer of glad tidings and a warner for all mankind {كَافَّةً لِلنَّاسِ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا}, and whose role implies the creation of a global divine society led by his followers till the end of time (رحمة للعالمين), is still waiting for the manifestation of this global divine revolution. This suggests that the course set by the revelation of the Prophetic message for the human caravan to reach its desired destination is still ongoing.

Therefore, to assume that what happened in the early Muslim history and the efforts made to actualize the divine message represent the climax and end of human history, beyond which we can't proceed, is neither an accurate interpretation of

history nor a proper understanding of the Prophetic message. This understanding of history, nourished by traditions such as the best of generations is my generation (*khair al-qurūn qarnī*), is not credible, particularly because during the Prophet's era, the concept of the Hijri calendar was non-existent. If a generation implies three consecutive centuries, as is evident from "then those who follow them, then those who follow them (ثم الذين يلونهم)" it does not establish an argument for the sanctification of the three generations - the Companions, the Followers, and the Followers of the Followers.

Early followers of Islam grasped a vital discernment, one often misunderstood, between the divine revelation, or "wahy," and the fabric of human history. They held a capacity for flexibility, to recalibrate and recontextualize the practices of their faith to meet the evolving demands of their times. It was a period predating the advent of the term "Salaf Saliheen," or "righteous predecessors". Instead, the societal rebuttal to a Qur'anic verse, {We found our fathers doing this} (Quran 21:53, 26:74, 28:36, 31:21, 43:23), was a prevalent norm.

It was in this context that the two great caliphs, the successors to Muhammad, felt empowered to bring about changes in some of the Prophet's practices. They understood and respected the journey of the Muhammadan message. It was not a static edict, but a living testament, fluid and responsive, continually adjusting to ensure justice amidst shifting landscapes of human existence.

Despite their profound emotional bond with the Prophet, these close companions, who cherished the memories of their shared moments and the wisdom he embodied, were not shackled by a rigid adherence to the past. Instead, they navigated the delicate balance between their past experiences and the divine revelations.

When objections were raised against the Caliph Umar's decision to change the Prophet's rulings on 'Ushr and Kharaj, he responded with an open and articulate defence, arguing that the previous ruling was contextually appropriate, but the new decision provided a stronger assurance of justice.

As long as this nuanced understanding of the dichotomy between revelation and history remained lucid, they were able to illuminate their path, guided by the creative interpretation of divine revelation, rather than merely clinging to the narratives of their ancestors. But as time progressed, when the prism through which they viewed Islam's historical experiences began to distort, equating these human experiences with divine revelation, the line blurred. The history of the 'best of generations' began to assume an unchallenged equivalence to revelation. As this misperception took root, they began to drift away from the essence of the revelation and its intended objectives.

Over the centuries, our reverence for history has constructed an almost unyielding barricade, tethering our yearning for a return to Islam within the confines of a misapprehended past. Our impassioned movements, revolving around religion and Shariah, are paradoxically rooted in the ambition to mirror the exact practices of Muslims of bygone generations; to recreate their interpretation of Shariah, and their devoted efforts in pursuing religious objectives, in the here and now.

We have consistently overlooked the fact that the pioneers in Shariah's application shaped their actions upon the anvil of their own religious comprehension. Their reasoning and interpretations are more a reflection of understanding Shariah rather than being integral parts of the Shariah itself. Additionally, these interpretations have never been static, they have always been evolving. An exploration of their scholarly

endeavours yields the unmistakable insight that to fulfil the objectives of Shariah, we need to adapt to shifting times and embrace novel experiences.

Regrettably, today we find ourselves ensnared in a predicament where envisaging anything beyond the established historical context of the Prophet Muhammad's message seems daunting. To articulate a definition of Islam without the influence of traditions, jurisprudence, or the convoluted debates from the annals of scholarly history seems an insurmountable task. This isn't because such a feat is inherently impossible, but rather because the ideological framework that has entrapped us for centuries views such a redefinition of Islam as an aberrant novelty.

The labels such as Shia, Sunni, Hanafi, Shafi'i, which, upon closer inspection, are deviations from our intellectual history, have become universally accepted as mainstream components of Islam. The potency of our sanctified historical narrative is so forceful that even our most profound thinkers, in spite of their deep-seated dissatisfaction with the prevailing state of affairs, cannot summon the courage to instigate a process of reform and purification. Even a casual analysis reveals that this distorted view of Islam is a product of our tumultuous history and cannot be rationalized through divine revelation.

In the aftermath of Prophet Muhammad's departure, a sudden vacuum loomed, threatening to tear apart the fabric of communal life. It was in this predicament that a group of individuals discerned the necessity for a strong Qurayshi leader to navigate through the storm. This was not an immutable divine mandate, but rather a contextual interpretation reflective of the unique exigencies of the era. Sanctifying history would occur if one insists on maintaining Qurayshi lineage as a cardinal prerequisite for the caliphate today. As the centuries unfolded, mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition has evolved

to accept the viability of a non-Qurayshi caliphate. The five centuries of Ottoman Turkish hegemony over the Islamic world testifies to this evolution, underscoring that the proclamation of "leadership from the Quraysh" was a product of historical contingencies rather than a divine edict.

Reflect upon this: If we were to mandate Qurayshi lineage as a fundamental requirement for the caliphate, what becomes of a divine society built upon the pillars of righteousness and piety? Moreover, in the practicalities of today, how would one go about the daunting task of identifying an authentic Qurayshi caliph? It seems an exercise more in abstract speculation than in realistic implementation. Ponder upon the variegated aristocracies, each meticulously crafting their lineages as per their capabilities. The question that arises: who amongst them merits credibility? Amid the rivalry that marked the era of the Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates, the entire arsenal of genealogical sciences was deployed to invalidate each other's ancestries. The Abbasids even commissioned scholars to pen fatwas in this quest, and yet, the reality of the lineage remained shrouded in mystery. It seems that the mandate of Qurayshi imamate, which once served as an emblem of unity, could, in time, become the epicentre of profound disputes.

Let us turn our attention to another historical incident, the Battle of Ridda. When Abu Bakr made known his intentions to wage war on those who resisted the payment of Zakat, harmony eluded the community. The aftermath of the battle brought forth divergent opinions among the companions about the treatment of prisoners. While Abu Bakr proposed a treatment akin to that of conventional war captives, Umar and other companions contended that these individuals, refusing Zakat but not denying their faith, were not apostates and thus should not be subjected to the usual treatment for adversaries. This discord meant that these individuals remained confined until Umar, on

assuming the caliphate, set them free. Abu Bakr's choice to confront those Kalima-chanting Muslims refusing Zakat was an independent judgement, dictated by the understanding that such rebellion, in the immediate wake of the Prophet's passing, could potentially trigger a substantial insurrection, placing the very existence of the Islamic state at risk. While this decision might have been instrumental in maintaining control over the circumstances, it should not be exalted to an eternal rule and used as a perennial argument, as is often done in justifying apostasy-related killings with reference to the Battle of Ridda.

Another instance from this epoch is the inception of Diwan al-Ata during Umar's reign. Leadership of military expeditions was generally a privilege of the Muhajireen and the Ansar. The creation of the Diwan al-Ata inadvertently enriched a specific segment of society, creating discontent due to disparities in remunerations between the Muhajireen and Ansar. Moreover, the concentration of wealth in Mecca and Medina invariably shaped the social landscape. The Diwan al-Ata, a measure of its time, provided a significant economic structure for Mujahideen families. To use these historical foundations to engineer a blueprint for the upliftment of contemporary Muslim society would indeed be a distortion of the lessons ingrained in history.

As the Arab conquerors journeyed far and wide, they fervently maintained their linguistic and cultural identities, imprinting their mark on all they encountered. Their cultural tapestry was so captivating that even fresh converts to Islam were enticed, drawn into the vortex of this dazzling civilization. However, the unfolding scene painted a more complex portrait. When Arab lineage and language took centre stage as indispensable emblems of societal esteem and virtue, it stirred a palpable disquiet amongst the Mawali, the non-Arab Muslims. This disturbance reached a crescendo with the Shu'ubiyah movement, a crucial pivot that precipitated the collapse of the

Umayyad Caliphate. The period bore witness to an extraordinary insistence on Arab identity. This emphasis led, in later epochs, to the conflation of Islam and Arab culture, perceived as two facets of the same coin. Yet, this phenomenon was more a reflection of the sociopolitical climate of that era, one characterized by the escalating struggle for societal superiority between the Arabs and the non-Muslim Mawali, particularly the Persians. It must be stressed, however, that no theoretical grounding existed to designate Arab culture as the sole embodiment of the Muhammadan message.¹¹

Fast forward to the present, it would be an oversimplification to equate the adoption of Arab attire, the incorporation of their customs, or the cultivation of their language and literature with an inherent affinity to Islam. The early dawn of the Muhammadan message may have been bathed in the glow of Arab culture, but it should not be misconstrued as its ultimate destination. Today, the Arab population comprises merely a fraction - a quarter - of the entire Muslim demographic. In the grand orchestra of international Islamic culture, the Arabs, therefore, play but a minority part.

As we pivot our attention to certain pivotal junctures in sacred history, we encounter a narrative that has set the stage for the birth of diverse sects within the Muslim community. Each of these sects passionately deciphers these events, embracing them as essential pillars of their faith.

The Caliphate of Abu Bakr serves as an illustrative example. The establishment of his rule was an outcome of a relatively constrained consultation, one that did not extend to companions beyond the confines of Medina. If we were to champion this procedural manifestation of the Caliphate as a theoretical paradigm, it would find itself at odds with the circumstances surrounding the ascension of subsequent Caliphs. Omar, for example, emerged from a consultation, while

Uthman's rule sprouted from a council of six chosen companions. Ali, when confronted by a crisis, tread the path of mass allegiance, and Muawiyah fortified his claim to the Caliphate through a nuanced process of negotiation and conciliation. The blueprint for establishing the Caliphate, thus, was not etched in stone, but evolved, moulding itself to the contours of the prevailing circumstances. Now, if an insistence emerges to regard the allegiance of Medina's people as the sole bedrock upon which the Caliphate is founded, discounting voices from other Islamic metropolises as unfit for consultation, or to reject all alternate methods, apart from those ordained by the Prophet's companions, as un-Islamic, wouldn't this merely amount to a deification of history?

In the revered text of the Quran, an undeniable stress is laid on the liberation of slaves and their humane treatment. Interestingly, the sacred text does not provide any distinct procedures for creating slaves. This absence of detail stands in stark contrast with the historical reality that when Muslim conquerors embarked on expeditions across diverse lands, a disconcerting revival of the commerce of slaves and indentured labour was seen in the major urban centres of the Islamic world. From the outset, Islam seemed to edge towards an organic dissolution of the institution of slavery, rather than advocating for a sudden and absolute abolition. A principle of ransoms for captives was established, hinting at a trajectory that, if followed consistently, might have swiftly consigned the institution of slavery to the pages of history. Yet, in stark reality, traditional practices that served the powerful elite were revitalized and maintained, creating a jarring contrast with the faith's foundational principles. This disparity was evident to perceptive individuals, such as Omar Ibn Abdul Aziz, who equated the practice of taking captive women as concubines to the sin of adultery.

In the light of these historical intricacies, if anyone today insists on attributing these archaic institutions as inherent to Islam, or argues that their resurrection aligns with the ultimate goals of the faith, it is clear that such individuals, entrapped in their narrow interpretation of history, have yet to fully grasp the expansive breath of divine revelation.

In his acclaimed *Sahih*, Imam Muslim narrates a striking tradition where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) firmly discouraged his followers from documenting his utterances, urging those who had committed them to parchment to expunge them. Yet, paradoxically, this explicit directive did little to quell the burgeoning curiosity and fascination for the Prophet's words and deeds, and those of his companions, as the years rolled by.

In this early epoch, the demarcations between various facets of Islamic knowledge such as Hadith, Seerah (Prophetic Biography), Tafsir (Quranic Exegesis), Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), and Genealogy were still nebulous. As the wheels of time inexorably turned, however, a more structured paradigm emerged. Hadith began to be collated systematically into coherent collections, while Fiqh, Tafsir, and Seerah crystallized into distinct, standalone disciplines.

Fast forward to the fourth Islamic century, and the landscape of Muslim identity had become a rich tapestry of affiliations. Beyond the political constructs of Shia, Sunni, Ibadi, a Muslim was also recognized by jurisprudential labels: Hanafi, Shafi'i, Zaidi, Ja'fari, and so forth. For the Sunnis, who constituted the majority and were perceived as the mainstream, the legal interpretations of the four venerable imams took centre stage. It became increasingly difficult to exist as a Muslim without subscribing to one of these four legal stalwarts. Over the course of time, the six esteemed Hadith compilations too, assumed an authoritative status akin to legislation. Intriguingly, Ibn Khaldun noted that Abu Hanifa had access to a scant

seventeen authenticated Hadiths. The esteemed Muwatta of Imam Malik housed a modest three hundred reliable traditions. In stark contrast, Imam Ahmad's Musnad saw the count of traditions spiral to an overwhelming thirty to forty thousand. The ascendance of Hadith scholars and jurists had a transformative impact on the corpus of Islamic knowledge, resulting in a landscape that was intriguingly intricate and fractioned. Caught amidst the crossfire of Hadith scholars contesting the authenticity of narrators and the palpable incongruities within the Hadiths, the landscape of Islamic discourse was riddled with contradictions too profound to reconcile. The jurists meticulously recorded these conflicts, and the quest for the true essence of Sharia, when seen through the prism of dialectical methodology, led to a hermeneutical odyssey that strayed from the path more often than it walked upon it.

The result of this oscillation between literalism and convention was a fertile ground for the flourishing of Sufism. The average Muslim was left bewildered, trying to decipher the genuine contours of their faith amidst this torrent of ideological evolution.

The multi-faceted Islamic tapestry, now adorned with the ascendance of Sufis, the stride of jurists, the compendium of traditions, the call to follow the footsteps of righteous predecessors, the rhetoric of the dialecticians, and the spiritual torchbearers of the Ahl al-Bayt, presented a panorama that was starkly different from what the early Muslims would have recognised. Yet, by the end of the Abbasid Caliphate, this historically moulded rendition of Islam was nestled deeply in the hearts of the faithful.

Jurists, with their scholarly ingenuity, had created a vast body of work where an almost universally accepted idea had attained near faith-like reverence: the age of deep reflection and analysis was deemed concluded. The heavy lifting had been

accomplished by their predecessors, and it was now their task merely to comply with the findings of the ancients.

A sense of profound melancholy was impossible to escape when recognising that the individual pronouncements of these jurists, often based on isolated narrations, had indelibly etched themselves into the enduring edifice of jurisprudence. While such a practice found no inherent approval within the bounds of Islam, the ebb and flow of history had bestowed upon these jurists a form of sanctity. This misplaced sanctification of personal misinterpretations and ambiguities had given rise to a scenario where they were regarded as expressions of the divine law.

Amid the labyrinth of Islamic jurisprudence, a fascinating tapestry of interpretations unfolded, often leading to diametrically opposed verdicts: actions deemed forbidden under the gaze of one scholar were sometimes considered permissible by another. Yet, in the midst of this intellectual maelstrom, a prevalent conviction began to solidify: a belief that any comprehensive understanding of the faith was now inextricably intertwined with the perspectives of these four distinguished scholars. The intellectual edifice built by these 'Four Imams' is akin to a dam in the river of our collective thought, obstructing the unimpeded flow of divine revelation. Until we dismantle this formidable bulwark of historical reverence, we remain distanced from the rejuvenating fountainhead of divine wisdom. Unless we address this, we stand to remain mired in a profound misapprehension, mistakenly conflating the human-constructed narratives of our forebears with the uniquely prophetic message of Muhammad (PBUH).

Whether our gaze rests on the annals of our own era or travels back in time to the righteous forebears, to conceive of this historical tapestry as a mere unfolding of the Muhammadan message would be a profound underestimation. This viewpoint

obscures the undiluted wellspring of divine revelation that persists, with its full richness and complexity, even in our contemporary world. This revelation, forever safeguarded in all its breadth and depth, continuously offers insights far beyond the confines of historical developments.

In the complex tapestry of our shared history, communities sometimes fall into a form of idolatry, sanctifying the past to a degree that it obscures the human frailty and struggle inherent to our existence. Reverence for those who walked before us, the "righteous predecessors," can unwittingly erect barriers that prevent us from acknowledging their shared humanity. Like us, they grappled earnestly with their faith, and their interpretations of it were inescapably human, liable to missteps and imperfections. Consequently, there is no justifiable reason to shy away from scrutinizing their work with a critical eye, harvesting their experiences to help shape the contours of our collective future. Our historical journey is a theatre of shifting norms, a testament to the transformative power of individual action. A solitary step, taken with the purest of intentions, can ripple across the cultural landscape, birthing unprecedented norms that, in time, are embraced as religious movements. Yet, it is imperative to remember that such acceptance is not synonymous with divine endorsement. Take, for instance, the Mu'tazili interpretation of religion. Once it attained widespread acceptance, it was believed to reflect the divine will in its purest form. Yet, the subsequent ascendancy of Ash'arism suggested that the Mu'tazili movement was but a stepping stone, smoothing the path for the triumph of Ash'arism.

Another historical example is the rise of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt. Standing as a formidable counterweight to the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and the Umayyad caliphate in the West, it convinced a sizeable portion of the Muslim population that the political trajectory of their faith had reached

its logical endpoint. In the heart of Fatimid Egypt, grandiose ceremonies came into being, cantered around the festival of Fatima. The Prophet's daughter, Fatima, was perceived as the spiritual lodestar guiding Islamic thought. This interpretation, intertwined with the Muhammadan message, breathed life into the Fatimid cause, creating a sense of inevitable momentum as if all territories would soon gravitate towards this new imamate. However, the passage of time provides a potent lens of perspective. Today, even as the Fatimid caliphate, with its grand successes, occupies a distinguished niche in the annals of history, we find ourselves asking: How many among us regard the Fatimid mould of faith as the definitive interpretation?

Instead of considering historical happenings as mere artifacts of interpretation, we ought to centre our investigations on this continually morphing essence, which reinvents itself in response to the flux of time. To illuminate this perspective, it could be useful to draw upon a few examples from the recent past. Within the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, the notion of an esoteric caliphate appears as an unfamiliar thought. However, in bygone times, owing to certain political exigencies, a number of leaders found it suitable to espouse this approach. As circumstances evolved and underwent a dramatic transformation, the applicability of this method progressively lost its potency. The esoteric caliphate tradition consequently transformed, becoming entangled with the business of spiritual mentorship, regrettably veering into the realm of corruption. Nevertheless, because of its unusual popularity, the task of its public denunciation did not come easily for the reformers of the community.

In our modern times, the "Faith Movement" (Jama'at Tabligh) championed by Maulana Ilyas has given birth to a unique and somewhat unexpected representation of Islam. This interpretation, in its singularity, diverges significantly from a

direct engagement with the faith's quintessence. The emphasis is on "The Six Principles," supplemented by the teachings encapsulated in Maulana Zakaria's *Faza'el A'amal*. Coupled with the ritual practices echoing the recitation of the "Manzil," and an endless cycle of spiritual sojourns (chilla) and retreats (gasht), this movement has contributed to a radical reshaping of Islam's visage. The convergence of these diverse elements has given rise to a novel and distinctive form, signifying the faith's continuing evolution within the confines of an ever-changing socio-religious landscape. In the aftermath of the Caliphate's dissolution, another metamorphosis of Islam started to take shape under the stewardship of figures like Abul Ala Maududi and Hassan al-Banna. These movements, which were far from traditional, painted Islam as a political framework more than a divine dispatch, imprinting an indelible trend to conceptualize Islam as an entire system, rather than merely a sacred revelation.

In the manifold forms that religion takes, be they close to or far removed from the crux of faith, they pose no inherent danger as long as we understand them as nothing more than human interpretations and adjustments, and our eyes remain dutifully turned towards the quintessential message of Prophet Muhammad. However, should we assign these modifications an undue stature, viewing them as the very essence and ultimate purpose of religion, thus supplanting Muhammad's teachings, we find ourselves on a perilous path. We risk succumbing to a form of idolatry enacted in the name of faith, a path where the fundamental essence of our belief might tragically elude us in the process.

Perceiving Islam through the Prism of Shariah

SHARIAH, AS PERCEIVED BY many devout believers, is a luminous path of worship, ceaselessly bathed in the divine light of revelation. Those who willingly surrender to this spiritual voyage are rewarded with a profound expansion of the soul - an experience akin to a ceaseless transition from shadow into the embrace of divine light.

Yet, this enlightening experience remains a mystery, an elusive spectre, for those who are untouched by the illuminating essence of divine revelation. As stated in the Quran 'Whomsoever God does not illuminate, will have no light' (24:40). The delineation between those who have been graced by revelation and those who haven't is as stark as the difference between the sighted and the blind.

The fortunate, the chosen ones who have been granted the light of revelation or bestowed with the book of divine guidance, find the journey from darkness into light surprisingly navigable. The Quran imparts this empowering, transformative illumination onto its followers. The responsibility, then, lies on their shoulders to continue the journey, to move from the shadows into the radiance, using the wisdom and insight provided by the divine revelation.

The Noble Quran is a beacon of guidance and light, not a codex of jurisprudence. It employs the language of exhortation, reminder, encouragement and warning. It is expected of those who are marked by the luminosity of revelation to navigate their way on the path of success and salvation, harnessing their discernment and insight. Life, ever dynamic and influenced by the flux of time and place, demands fresh decisions and solutions at every turn. When our senses are familiar with the distinctions between good and evil, the awareness of the commendable and the reprehensible, and above all, the profound joy of sincere worship, it is not daunting to guide the caravan of humanity on the correct course.

Conversely, if we reduce servitude to mere verbal recitations and legalistic details, not only does life turn into a soulless mechanical process, but frequently, the shifting sands of time and space can cause this verbal and legal adherence to result in a stark contradiction of the very essence of revelation. Such a path could ironically lead to the defeat of what divine revelation sought to achieve in the first place.

One intriguing narration reveals that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) once sent a group of his companions on a pressing military mission, specifying they should only perform their Asr prayer upon reaching their destination. As the Asr time was lapsing and the destination was still far off, this presented a moral dilemma. Some companions, interpreting the essence of the instruction, chose to perform the prayer en route, believing the urgency lay in reaching the destination, not in postponing the prayer. Others, adhering to the letter of the Prophet's instruction, decided to delay their prayer until they had arrived at their destination.¹²

This poignant incident unveils an essential aspect of the Islamic faith: its adaptability. Both the parties in this situation, though acting differently, were correct in their practice. They

engaged their judgement, reflecting their understanding of the spirit and principles of their faith. This suggests that there's an inherent flexibility in the Islamic tradition, permitting interpretation and contextual decisions, and thus, avoiding a monolithic, rigid approach. The faith, instead of becoming a mechanical adherence to rules, is transformed into a vibrant practice that can evolve with the needs and challenges of the time.

Through the lens of unadulterated monotheism, the Quran presents a blueprint of life that urges individuals towards ethical actions that range from spiritual observances - such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and alms-giving - to practical virtues like maintaining fraternity, endorsing benevolence, advocating moral norms, and honouring social contracts. It exhorts protection of the vulnerable, from slaves to orphans, prisoners, women, and the weak. Moreover, it demands respect for the rights of parents, and abstinence from acts of violence, injustice, pride, dishonesty, defamation, and gossip.

Simultaneously, it outlines stringent regulations for combating societal vice, preserving the dignity of individuals from false allegations, and implementing punitive measures against those disrupting peace or committing crimes such as theft and robbery. Notably, these directives apply equally to everyone, regardless of their apparent piety. Those who perform their prayers regularly, yet lack humility, whose prayers do not deter them from oppressing the needy or inspire them to feed the poor, find their hollow worship called into question.

This intricate tapestry of spiritual and ethical injunctions, woven by the Quran, illuminates its profound ambition: to foster a society where the essence of worship is not trapped in lifeless rituals but is vibrantly alive in every act of kindness, justice, and humility. It envisions a community where obedience is not imposed by external force but wells up from the inner

reservoir of conviction. The Quran's aim is to craft a civilization where spirituality and social justice are intertwined, where personal integrity is revered, and where communal harmony thrives.

In the dawn of its existence, the Quran was the bedrock of the Muslim community - an absolute, unyielding beacon illuminating their path. It was more than just a religious text; it was a holistic invitation, reaching out to believers in all their multitudes, urging them to a life of profound reflection. Imbued with a spiritual aura, where the very mention of Allah's verses set hearts aflutter, no one could imagine creating a distinction between those verses needing the meticulous scrutiny of a legal scholar and those that could simply be glossed over. The Quran's call to its followers, manifesting through the stirring metaphor of rain nourishing the earth to produce a myriad of colourful fruits, planted the seed of awe that is the hallmark of a true seeker of knowledge.

For the early Muslims, the Quran was more than a book; it was a living manifesto that dictated the rhythm of life. As long as the complete Quran was accessible to the followers of Muhammad, their communal life, despite its intricacies, navigated the pathway set out by the Sharia.

However, with the advent of the second century, a new chapter began to unfold in the Islamic narrative. There was a subtle, yet discernible shift as foreign influences started to permeate the interpretation of the religion. Drawing inspiration from the interpretative approach of the Jews and the rhetorical style of the Church, a fresh jurisprudential and theological perspective began to take root among Muslims. This represented a pivotal juncture, a blending of the indigenous Islamic thought with the incoming intellectual currents, thereby redefining the understanding and application of the Quran in a complex and fascinating interplay.

In the scholarly world of jurisprudence, a meticulous quest was embarked upon - to unearth the legal commandments hidden within the verses of the Quran. The rhythm of this quest found form in the written word, as books began to manifest, their pages echoing the principles drawn from these "legal verses." The thought began to echo within the halls of scholarly discussion, that a set of five hundred such verses existed within the Quran. If these verses could be unfurled in their entirety, their wisdom held the potential to illuminate every corner of a religious life.

When the scholars cast their gaze upon the practices of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and alms-giving, among others, the realm of religious discussion began to teem with debates around the essence of obligation, tradition, and the merits of voluntary and recommended acts. An element as fundamental as ablution began to reveal layers of complexity, each scholar interpreting the obligation and tradition tied to each act differently. The microscope of external methodologies brought into focus a jurisprudential and legalistic interpretation of prayer, one that was heavily skewed towards the observable acts. But in this detailed examination, the scales tipped away from the core of prayer – fostering the connection with Allah.

As time etched new lines into the face of jurisprudence, the prayers emanating from the scholars grew increasingly discordant. The harmonious symphony of communal worship, once a shared act of devotion, seemed an elusive melody. The scholars' divergent prayers added new threads to the complex tapestry of the Muslim community, influencing the pattern of religious and spiritual expression, and reshaping the contours of unity and diversity within its folds.

Yet another fault became manifest as this methodology held sway. A scant five hundred verses of the Quran - those classified as 'statutory verses' by the jurists - procured their seat at our

scholarly forum, albeit under an imperfect system. The remainder of the Quran slipped away from our sphere of meditation and thought. The prevailing sentiment held that the Quran's call to reflection was confined solely to these 'statutory verses', and that comprehension of these verses was ample to organise the religious existence of Muslims.

Within the expansive tomes of jurisprudence and the interminable series of legal rulings, the intellectual machinations operating under the name of 'Fiqh' or understanding, were predominantly rooted in these very verses. The gravest casualty of this approach, however, was a transformation in the foundational status of the Quran amongst the general populace. The path was thus smoothed for the birth of fresh religious literature, inciting a circumstance that the Quran had previously portrayed as the burdens of antiquated customs.

The respect once accorded to the Quran became diluted, its words no longer the sole beacon guiding the believers' life. In its stead, a patchwork of legal manuscripts and religious writings surfaced, gaining precedence in the daily lives of the adherents. Consequently, the Quran was relegated to the role of an ancient scripture, its wisdom sought merely within the secluded confines of scholarly circles, rarely reverberating in the lived experiences of the Muslim people. This disquieting shift denoted a revival of an old predicament – a situation that the Quran itself had once endeavoured to address by shattering the manacles of convention and tradition.

Characterizing faith as Sharia, understood as jurisprudence and legal code, was an oversight rooted fundamentally in an academic approach's outcome. As jurists delved into the labyrinth of obligations and recommendations, acceptable and undesirable, on their quest for the ultimate aim of religious law, they were inevitably led to accept that any act forsaken due to obligations would seemingly threaten its legal validity.

However, they neglected the fact that these categories of obligation, recommendation, permissibility, and undesirability were, in essence, their own constructions. Over time, this juridical interpretation of faith began to be perceived as an immutable source of spiritual aspirations. The masses lost sight of the fact that the legal rules derived by these scholars were interpretative rather than prescriptive. While they could be regarded as an interpretation of Sharia, they could not, in themselves, be applied as Sharia.

In the authentic sense, Sharia, which signifies guidance and light, stems directly from the unalterable source - the Holy Quran. This is the ultimate and non-negotiable reference for the spiritual life of believers. However, in our modern conversations about adherence to Sharia, there seems to be a misinterpretation. It is rarely understood as requiring a direct engagement with and absolute obedience to the Quran itself.

Instead, many perceive it to imply the imposition of the legal interpretations and rulings as formulated by jurists over the centuries, replete with their intricate nuances and contentious debates. To put it differently, our pursuit for divine directives no longer turns our attention towards the Quran. Rather, our vision becomes ensnared and obscured within the vast, conflict-ridden expanse of jurisprudential discourse.

Our modern intellectual landscape is shaped by a disconcerting confusion. Whenever calls for the enforcement of Sharia rise in pitch or religious scholars seize the reins of power in a region, our instinctive priority veers towards the implementation of Hudood and Ta'zir, the specific forms of Islamic punishment, all under the banner of establishing Sharia.

Even our distinguished scholars, individuals deeply immersed in their jurisprudential explorations, have not fully grasped a crucial nuance. Sharia is not merely an assembly of laws concerning punishment, marriage and divorce, inheritance

and transactions. Instead, it serves as a radiant beacon, embodying the totality of God's book. This divine scripture, the Quran, was revealed to us in a language that resonates in our hearts, so that humanity might continue its journey from obscurity to enlightenment: "A Book We have sent down to you so that you may bring mankind out of the darkness into the light" (Quran 14:1).

As we traverse this path, if we fail to be accompanied by the entire sacred book, we risk falling short in modelling the ideal form of servitude. For God demands our servitude and devotion with the holistic reference to the book as guided, "Indeed, We have sent down to you the Book with truth, so worship God, dedicating your religion to Him alone" (Quran 39:2).

Contrastingly, to delineate only a handful of verses as Sharia, while disregarding the remainder of the book as extraneous, is an incomplete interpretation of the faith. It might even attract the application of "You believe in some of the book and reject other parts" (Quran 2:85). We must remember that we are embarking on a journey of total dedication, where every verse serves as a guidepost, not a destination.

The prevalent interpretation of Sharia, confining it merely to the verses of injunctions, is an offspring of our historiographical narrative, lacking any explicit anchoring in the Quran itself. In the Quran's perspective, the entire scripture is the constitution of the Sharia. The exhortation to "Enter into peace completely" (Quran 2:208) articulates the aspiration that our lives ought to be saturated with unreserved compliance to divine inspiration.

Furthermore, how can the Quranic invocation to meditate upon the signs of the cosmos be detached from the establishment of Sharia? When we acknowledge the Quran in its entirety as an integral component of Sharia, we then recognize that our intellectual and spiritual interaction with the world is as

essential to our religious observance as is the adherence to specific regulations and rituals. It is this paradigm shift that propels us towards a comprehension of faith that is comprehensive, not fragmentary; expansive, not confined; encompassing all facets of human existence, not merely the ceremonial or juristic.

Our deep-rooted conviction in the domain of Sharia, as assembled by our jurisprudential thinkers, has led our intellectual voyage into an impasse, barricading it within a closed alley for centuries. Even our most esteemed jurists have viewed the contributions of the four Imams as an insurmountable intellectual pinnacle, a peak too high, thus deeming any attempt to surpass it as a venture into futility. This unfortunate pathway reduces all lofty claims of Ijtihad, the practice of formulating legal rulings through independent interpretation of the legal sources, into a whirlpool of insignificance. Some argue that the epoch of the unrestricted jurist, or Mujtahid Mutlaq, is a relic of the past. For the new generation of jurists, their role has been reduced to merely sprucing up and enhancing the already established scaffolding of the four legal schools. But, the crux of the issue rests in this quandary: if the original interpretation of Sharia is itself incomplete, and further skewed by the constraints of Kalam - the Islamic tradition of pursuing theological principles through dialectic - how could a sound and stable structure ever be erected on such a warped foundation?

A rendition of Sharia that strives to construct the fabric of religious life from a scant selection of verses, rather than acknowledging the entire Quran as the blueprint of Sharia, cannot cultivate the outcomes that were the hallmarks of the life of the Muslims of the inaugural century. It becomes imperative for us, then, to reconcile with the Quranic understanding of Sharia, wherein the entire text operates as the guiding light.

This is not merely an intellectual revision but a journey back to the very roots of our faith.

The jurisprudential concept of Sharia, as opposed to its Qur'anic manifestation, often finds nourishment in sources thoroughly beholden to human interpretation and comprehension. Take, for instance, the reliance on Hadiths, statements attributed to the Prophet, which naturally elicits questions about their authenticity and reliability. A substantial degree of divergence among jurists has its roots in the varying interpretations and inconsistent nature of these Hadiths. A common argument posits that the rulings of a jurist were shaped by the Hadiths within their reach, leading to discrepancies when certain Hadiths accessible to one jurist were out of reach for another. If we concur with this reasoning as essentially valid, it leaves us in a quandary. We find ourselves in an epoch where all Hadiths and historical narratives are at our fingertips, and computerized search capabilities allow us to sift through vast Hadith collections at an unprecedented pace. Thus, we find ourselves asking, why should we lean on the perceptions of those who by their own admission were navigating with a partial map? Why restrict ourselves to their confined views when the complete array of Hadiths is within our grasp, enabling us to formulate our own interpretations? The essence of Sharia may well be closer than it appears, waiting for us to untangle it from centuries of layered interpretations. As we venture further into this era of readily accessible information, it behoves us to harness these capabilities and engage directly with our religious teachings, fostering a more comprehensive understanding.

The third pillar the jurists of Sharia law lean on is 'Ijma', or consensus - an intriguing notion which, rather ironically, is bereft of a firm anchor either in the very laws of Sharia or in historical evidences of its practical manifestation. When 'Ijma' is envisioned as the exclusive domain of the learned, as proposed

by Al-Shafi'i, we are looking at a structure that pointedly side-steps the majority of the community. In a belief system that does not sanction the concept of priesthood, the question arises: how plausible is it to bestow such unilateral steering power to a private conclave of scholars, to chart the course for the collective? Moreover, the presupposition that the agreement of a certain group of scholars, isolated to a specific city or era, could be imposed as a binding precedent on the sprawling expanse of the Muslim community, traversing diverse regions and epochs, is riddled with complexities. How can we validate such a consensus as a navigational beacon for future generations? What makes it an infallible guideline for others to follow, when societal norms, understanding, and circumstances are prone to flux?

In the face of these considerations, 'Ijma' calls for a much-needed reappraisal. The Islamic principles need to be realigned and reframed, accommodating a wider inclusivity and a dynamic interpretation, so that we hold fast to the marrow of the faith while addressing the imperatives of the contemporary world.

Al-Shafi'i himself, in his book *Al-Umm*, repudiates the notion of 'Ijma'—he contends that the 'learned' whose consensus was being sought in different regions were, in his time, essentially theologians or scholars of 'Kalam'. To him, the minimum penalty for these intellectuals could be to have them mounted on donkeys and publicly flogged. Can we confidently assert that individuals deserving of such punishments no longer exist today? Therefore, the act of endorsing or claiming a consensus—'Ijma'—is not without its inherent risks.

In truth, the foundation of 'Ijma' is nothing more than 'Ijma' itself; it is a well-entrenched tradition of our complex thinking that we are seldom prepared to abandon. Some eminent scholars even regard its status as surpassing that of the text (the Quran). According to the Hanbali jurist Ibn Aqil, the

standing of 'Ijma' is one step above the text: "Although the text is free from errors, there remains a possibility—albeit slight—that a verse might be found that abrogates it. On the other hand, 'Ijma' is superior to any doubt or uncertainty because the probability of disagreement or abrogation does not arise here. In this case, there is no alternative that can override it." So, what we find is a peculiar paradox, where the legitimacy of 'Ijma' is reinforced by the same consensus it is supposed to represent, thereby making it a somewhat self-perpetuating and self-referential construct. This doesn't only speak to the recursive logic at play in religious jurisprudence, but also underscores the importance of maintaining an open mind for reinterpretations and re-evaluations, lest we lose sight of the very spirit of faith amidst an overzealous preservation of form.¹³

The fourth cornerstone of the jurisprudential Sharia, known as 'Qiyas', represents an intellectual exercise of drawing the unfamiliar from the familiar, of deducing the unknown rulings from the known ones, through a conceptual bridge referred to as the cause (Illah). It's a delicate dance of identifying a causal factor in an original scenario and then extending this to analogous situations - a practice, in the lexicon of jurisprudence, termed as 'Qiyas'. This very act of isolating the root cause, forging a connection to an analogous issue, and unravelling their shared causality, is a reflection of a jurist's unique comprehension and wisdom. Yet, it's an endeavour laced with inevitable ambiguities and conflicting interpretations.

Consequently, it is a paradox to envision that such matters, which hinge on human intellect and that invite alternative interpretations from other scholars, could be elevated to the absoluteness of sharia. The very act of endorsing 'Qiyas' as a pillar of sharia has incited significant debates among the early architects of jurisprudence. Some schools of thought, like the Zahiri and Shia, staunchly disapprove of 'Qiyas', while the

eminent Sunni Imams exhibit varied levels of acceptance towards it.

Yet, from our perspective, the matter of who among the notable jurists champions or rejects 'Qiyas' is not the main concern. Rather, the critical point is the recognition that elements that rely on human cognition and are naturally prone to a diversity of interpretations, can't be given the ultimate sanctity of sharia.

The diversity of the underlying principles among the scholars of jurisprudence itself serves as a testament to this. Notably, except for the Quran, human understanding has had its imprint on the remaining three of the four foundations that gave birth to the codified Sharia. The resulting jurisprudential sharia, born out of these principles, is therefore an embodiment of a formidable mountain of disagreements, highlighting the challenges in its interpretation.

One does not have to look far to understand the complex, layered nature of these intellectual disagreements. A brief examination of *Al-Mudawwanah al-Kubrā* by Sahnun al-Mālikī, *Al-Muḥallā bil-Āthār* by Ibn Ḥazm al-Zāhirī, and *Dā' ā' im al-Islām* by Ismaili jurist Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, provides ample illustration. These texts showcase a labyrinth of variances in religious rulings due to the fundamental differences in jurisprudential principles. In our journey thus far, we have emphasized the profound role these distinctions have played in moulding diverse expressions of faith.

Yet, there may be those who view these disputes in jurisprudence as remnants of a bygone era. They imagine a golden past where the polished Sharia of our ancestors provided a cohesive framework for Muslim unity. However, anyone who even takes a fleeting glance at texts such as Shafi'i's *Kitāb Al-Umm*, Shaybani's *Al-Mabsūṭ* or Ibn Qudama's *Al-Mughnī* can

easily discern that our intellectual divergences are deeply rooted in these seminal works. Through countless reproductions, these texts continue to vitalise the bustling marketplace of jurisprudential literature. They have played a significant role in transforming the once unified Ummah into what could be best described as a "Fractured Ummah," both intellectually and practically.

In the crucible of legal dissonances, perpetuated for over a millennium by jurisprudence in the context of the ultimate objectives of Sharia, Muslims find themselves entwined in a relentless tangle of cognitive strain and intellectual ambiguity. It is indeed an arduous task for them to identify the quintessential expression of Sharia. Consider, for example, the differing opinions on communal prayer among Malikis and Shafi'is, who validate the joint prayers of men and women in the same line, while Abu Hanifa considers the man's prayer invalid under such circumstances. Equally, there is a lack of consensus on whether a prayer remains valid if followers are physically separated from their Imam by a road or river. Shafi'i's stance leans towards validation, whereas Abu Hanifa diverges, deeming such prayers as invalid. However, the dynamics shift if the Imam is located in a mosque while the followers pray from their respective homes. In such a context, the prayers are negated by Malik, Shafi'i, and Ahmad, while Abu Hanifa extends his endorsement to their validity. The quartet of major jurists, the stalwarts of the four dominant schools of Islamic law, uphold the necessity of ablution as a prerequisite for funeral prayers, whereas distinguished scholars such as Al-Shaabi and Jarir al-Tabari question its necessity. The 'Aqiqah', which enjoys widespread acceptance among Muslims as an admirable Sunnah, and which is advocated by Malik and Shafi'i, does not ascend to the level of obligation in the eyes of Abu Hanifa.

These scenarios underscore the pervasiveness and depth of these disagreements, which in turn, intensify the complexity of understanding and practising the faith. The crux of the matter, however, is not solely the navigation of these elaborate differences. Rather, the faithful are challenged to comprehend them within their historical and jurisprudential frameworks, and to harmonise them with their lived experience of their faith.

In the discourse of Shafi'i and Ahmad, marriage for a woman cannot be enacted in the absence of her guardian. However, this belief diverges sharply from that of Abu Hanifa, who postulates that a woman's marriage is valid even without her guardian. The resulting contradictions manifest themselves on even deeper strata of jurisprudence, seen, for instance, in the timeframe set by Hanafi thought for the establishment of lineage. A two-year maximum period is assumed, conjecturing that the gestation period of a foetus within its mother's womb can range from a scant six months to an extended two years. This belief, while not founded in prophetic revelation or medical corroboration, persists within the sphere of this school of thought. Malikis, on the other hand, posit a far more expansive timeline, spanning anywhere from four to even seven years in some interpretations.

Differences in legal thought surface again in the context of penalties for alcohol consumption. The contrasting perspectives of Abu Hanifa and Malik advocate eighty lashes, whereas Shafi'i proposes a more lenient forty. In discussions about the potential of a woman holding judicial office, the scholars once again split. Both the Muwatta and Shafi'i schools deem it inappropriate, while Abu Hanifa and Tabari argue in favour.

The jurisprudential texts host fascinating debates, such as the one concerning culpability in instances of intentional murder. Imagine a scenario where an individual is restrained by a person, while a third party executes the killing. Who should

bear the blame? Abu Hanifa and Shafi'i put the responsibility on the actual killer, absolving the restrainer. However, Malik would indict both parties.

This dynamic discourse is a testament to the rich diversity of perspectives within the realm of Islamic jurisprudence, with interpretations alternately converging and diverging in intriguing ways. The challenge lies in holding space for the multiplicity of views while simultaneously striving for an ultimate truth, a dichotomy that has been at the heart of the evolution of Islamic thought over the centuries.¹⁴

These few illustrations of juristic disagreement, drawn from *Rahmat al-Ummah fi Ikhtilaf al-A'imah* by Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman Damashqi Al-Shafi'i, offer a glimpse into the rich tapestry of differing viewpoints. The spectrum of contrast found within comparative jurisprudence, as depicted in such works, is truly a broad canvas, complicated to fully comprehend.

Each individual misunderstanding that over time transformed into collective and sectarian discrepancies should have been perceived as mere interpretive missteps. Had this approach been adopted, there would be room for rectification, for refinement, enabling a return to the ultimate ethos of Sharia.

However, history unfolded differently. As time passed, the interpretative texts and the jurisprudence contained therein began to be viewed with an almost sacred reverence, akin to the Sharia itself. The debates and disagreements among jurists were imbued with an aura of sanctity, as is evident in the title of Damashqi's work. These conflicts among jurists were increasingly seen as catalysts for mercy, even in the face of the Qur'anic directive to avoid such discord. As it is said in the Qur'an, "And do not dispute (with one another) lest you lose courage and your strength depart" (Qur'an 8:46).

The Qur'an suggests that disharmony might sap your spirit, but the stubborn conviction of jurists is that disagreements, if carried out under the jurisdiction of the jurists themselves, should be viewed as a wellspring of mercy. This belief perseveres irrespective of whether such disagreements result in the nullification of a marriage contract, as is the perspective of the Shafi'i in the case of 'Khayār Bulūgh' (the age of maturity), or even if it leads to a capital punishment, as the Malikis would argue in the context of complicity in premeditated murder.

In these scenarios, among others, the discord sewn among jurists is treated as a conduit for mercy, a perspective that persists regardless of the serious repercussions that it may entail for the people involved.

In the collective consciousness, we often find an assertion that these disparate and at times conflicting verdicts from the jurists somehow harmoniously manifest the ultimate aims of Sharia. A common notion has been woven into our thought patterns, suggesting that following any one among the quartet of Imams is tantamount to adhering to Sharia. Yet, one struggles to find any logical or Sharia-compliant justification for assigning equal validity to these conflicting interpretations.

These Four Imams, who were not beneficiaries of divine appointments, exist in a theoretical space where we acknowledge that the only clear, unalterable benchmarks for discerning truth from falsehood are God's Book and the established Sunnah of the Prophet. Yet, somehow, we have found a way to sanctify their intellectual uncertainties and contradictions.

Elevating juristic Sharia to a pedestal of sanctity, the solitary interpretations and confusions, and even the unique perspectives of the jurists have managed to gain such widespread acceptance due to the expanse of their discipleship that these are now considered enduring and authentic expressions of Sharia.

There have been instances when we, in an attempt to validate these ambiguities, have not shied away from encroaching upon the sanctity of the Quran. Take, for example, the issue of Rajm (stoning to death) for the married individual guilty of adultery. The jurists contend that the Sharia sanctions Rajm as the prescribed penalty. It is suggested that the "Verse of Rajm" may not be found in the Quran anymore because its text has been superseded, but its mandate endures. This paradoxical reasoning has been the basis for an endless series of complex and drawn-out debates among the jurists.

My aim here is not to encompass all such debates but merely to underscore this point: in our journey to equate the words of elders to Sharia, we have unwittingly stumbled into the thicket of some of the most detrimental confusions within the lineage of divine revelations.

Another compelling instance of this challenge can be found in the debate concerning the term "Kalalah". This is where the scholarly agility of the jurists becomes center stage, pivoting around the interpretation proposed by Ubayy ibn Ka'b. His reading of the Quranic verse, "If a man leaves a Kalalah, or a woman, and he (or she) has a brother or a sister..." carries an additional term, لأم "Lu'amm". This single term has, rather intriguingly, influenced the jurists to encompass the children of paternal uncles within those who share inheritance.

Intriguingly, the term "Lu'amm" is not present in the traditional, widely accepted versions of the Quran. However, this term holds a central, almost pivotal position in the juristic understanding of inheritance. It is almost as if the jurists' philosophical deliberations, deeply embedded in dialectic logic, have resulted in the orphaned grandchildren being divested of their inheritance rights. This stance stands in glaring contrast to

their own principle of "the nearest in kinship has the priority in inheritance."

Under ordinary circumstances, upon the father's demise when the grandfather is still alive, the grandchildren's kinship is directly linked with the grandfather. This relationship effectively connects the grandchildren to their grandfather directly, without the need for any intermediary. This happens even when there are living grandchildren from the paternal uncle. Consequently, it seems unreasonable to assert that the sudden death of the grandfather would cause these grandchildren to forfeit their rights to inheritance.

However, those accustomed to examining the Sharia through the lens of logic and argumentation might come to the conclusion that the death of the father, who was the linchpin of all inheritance claims, inexorably leads to the orphaned grandchildren facing an absolute deprivation from inheritance. This perspective, though seemingly logical, fails to take into account the inherent nuances and humane provisions embedded within the Sharia.

The call of the hour is not to ossify the thousand-year-old tradition of jurisprudence, a tradition significantly shaped by Greek knowledge and the methodologies of Talmudic circles, as the immutable source of Sharia. Instead, we should renew our engagement with the Quran, not just as an isolated set of instructions, but as a comprehensive guide for our individual and collective lives. We should allow it, with a sense of fervent readiness, to set the course of our existence.

In this endeavour, the well-established, universally accepted, and divinely revealed Sunnah of the Prophet can assist us, offering a handhold that might guide our understanding and engagement with the eternal word of God. The time is ripe for us to view these age-old traditions not as inflexible edicts, but as living, breathing guides that are meant to be thoughtfully

engaged with, in light of the sociocultural realities of the present.

Yet, it is critical that we continuously discern the difference between history and tradition. This necessitates our unwavering faith in the integrity and sanctity of the Quran, while freeing ourselves from the mental constraint that any of its verses have been abrogated, abandoned, or lost, or that its recitation in various compilations differ markedly. The presence of progression and gradation in its admonitions and exhortations should not be misconstrued as implying contradictions or abrogations within the Quranic verses.

Consider the issue of the prohibition of alcohol, for example. Some verses indicate its harm by asserting "its sin is greater than its benefit," while others categorically advise to "avoid it." However, alcohol, in moderate quantities naturally present in certain foods and fruits, is not listed among the forbidden. Its usage in medicines and as a preservative is an age-old practice. Yet, its consumption as an intoxicant can be destructive for human society. Therefore, it was deemed essential by the Quran to warn us about this potential hazard.

In this light, the Quran becomes less a code of rigid laws and more a guide to responsible living, a compass orienting us towards individual and collective wellbeing. It is about engagement with life's challenges, taking into consideration the specifics of each situation and the broad, humane principles laid down in the Quran. The rules are not there to restrict but to foster human dignity, justice, and equity.

The progressive injunction against alcohol consumption testifies to the reality that if a society is mindful of its course, the adherents of revelation, with their wisdom and insight, can effectively navigate its varying stages. Indeed, errors may occur in the pursuit of defining the ultimate objectives of Shariah, but as long as the journey's direction is clear and steps are

continually taken towards the desired destination, human experience itself is sufficient to identify and correct these missteps. It suggests that the journey of faith is not about infallible adherence to static rules but about learning, adaptability, and the application of principles to the evolving circumstances of life. It is about striving for a balance that respects both the spirit of divine guidance and the changing realities of human experience.

The Quran is not a rigid manual for an immobile society, resisting change. Its call to guide us onto the 'straight path' (Sirat al-Mustaqeem) implies a journey that is ever-ongoing, continually adapting to new circumstances. With the change in time and place, we encounter fresh challenges at every juncture. Since the time of Prophet Muhammad, it is now our responsibility to address these changes using our understanding and wisdom.

The comprehension of Shariah is not static but rather a continuously developing process. If our understanding mirrors exactly that of our predecessors, it suggests that we're still anchored to the past. There are numerous issues in the Quran left intentionally open-ended, relying on the discernment of its followers.

God, who is omniscient, was well aware of the myriad challenges that would arise. For instance, in the Quran, believers are instructed to fast from the break of dawn until nightfall: "Eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct to you from the black thread [of night], then complete the fast till nightfall." (2:187). In Scandinavian countries, where nights are extraordinarily short during summers, this conventional concept of a 'day' might feel insufficient. The solution to these dilemmas lies in the interpretation and wisdom of those practicing the faith. These are the challenges that demand our innovative and thoughtful engagement with the scripture.

The tight constraints of traditional Islamic jurisprudence, or Fiqh, are far from unnoticed by scholars. Their predicament, however, lies in attempting to untangle the knots woven by this very system, using the tools it provides. Trapped within the dome of jurisprudence, their only solace is found in the contortions of legal reasoning, known as *Hiyal al-Fiqh*.

Take, for example, the matter of 'triple talaq' (instant divorce). An outright reconsideration of this practice remains unthinkable to these scholars. Still, they readily advise seeking guidance from Ahl-e-Hadees scholars to skirt around the harms birthed by this predicament. Similarly, while they shy away from a brave re-examination of the distinction between interest and usury, engaging with the Quranic term "multiplying multiples," they have no hesitation in proposing workarounds—like advancing a hundred and fifty rupees for a commodity worth a hundred.

Islamic banking, which continues to gain momentum, owes much of its acceptance to the clever manipulations applied to concepts like partnership (*Musharakah*), speculation (*Mudarabah*), or goodwill (*Murabahah*). Underneath its surface, it merely clothes a conventional interest system in an Islamic guise, making it somewhat more palatable to ordinary Muslims.

In their pursuit of leniency in religious rulings, Muslims are not confined to knocking at the closed gates of the four Sunni schools of Fiqh. They also see no harm in seeking refuge in Ja'fari Fiqh if it provides an appropriate solution. This is exemplified by the four Sunni Prime Ministers of modern Lebanon, who posthumously turned out to be Shias in their wills. This cunning move ensured their daughters could stake a claim to their inheritance according to Ja'fari Fiqh, in the absence of any male heirs.¹⁵

Prior to the establishment of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, the Quran was a beacon of guidance, a dynamic

compass, not a static legal codex. Notable figures like Caliph Umar, illuminated this perspective. Even when faced with direct scriptural mandates, he adjusted legal practices, like suspending the penalty of amputation and ceasing Muallefatul Quloob - financial assistance to win the hearts of new Muslims. His actions resonated with the greater objectives of Sharia, highlighting its potential adaptability.

Today, individuals daring enough to perceive the Quran as a guidepost rather than an unchanging rulebook, stand to gain considerable wisdom from such an innovative and enlightened approach to divine revelation. An approach that echoes the active intellectual engagement and creative interpretation of the Prophet's companions.

This approach could also serve as a catalyst for tackling the intellectual stagnation imposed by the jurisprudence of the four Imams, which has bound our thought processes for more than a millennium. But breaking free from these ideological boundaries demands more than just the current jurisprudential attempts; it requires the courage to scrutinize the very concept of Ijtihad - independent reasoning in Islamic law - that has seductively lured us into an intellectual mirage.

A critical reassessment of the foundational principles that uphold conventional jurisprudence is required, coupled with the development of a fresh scholarly methodology. Without these transformative measures, our attempts to draw directly from the Quran will remain confined within the ideological boundaries of our traditional jurisprudence.

Islam: An Inclusive Project of Divine Societal Reform

ISLAM ADVOCATES FOR THE establishment of a divine global society, a project led by the followers of Prophet Muhammad, yet designed to be inclusive, barring no faithful from participation. The bearers of 'بشيراً ونذيراً' (good tidings and warnings to all of humanity) and followers of the 'رحمة للعالمين' (mercy for all worlds) should comprehend, more than others, that religious and sectarian differences are part and parcel of the divine scheme.

The establishment of such a divine society amidst all intellectual and ideological differences presents a theoretical and practical challenge. Success in this endeavour requires clarity of thought and conviction in certain fundamental issues. Today, if some Muslim intellectuals deem the realization of a divine global society an impossibility, or if certain circles are waiting for the advent of the Mahdi or the second coming of Messiah to accomplish this task, it's largely because they perceive the establishment of such a society as implausible amidst the conundrum of religious and sectarian differences. How can those who have been fragmented for centuries within the bounds of varied jurisprudential tents, and for whom the notion

of a collective system in the Islamic world seems absurd due to the division of Sunni and Shia, ever contemplate participation from non-Muslim nations in a global project? For centuries, we've been shackled to a particular interpretation of faith that not only lacks respect and honour for the beliefs and practices of other nations but also considers the faith of fellow Muslims outside our own jurisprudential tent as unworthy.

Scholars and interpreters of old, driven by certain political situations and interests, presented interpretations of those Qur'anic verses relating to non-Muslim nations as the ultimate and final goal of revelation. As a result, we've drifted from an understanding that is evidently reflected throughout early Islamic history. For a new beginning, it is essential that we reimagine the Qur'an's perspective in all its dimensions. Only then can we continue our direct acquisition from the Qur'an in our current times, following the same prophetic lines that were intended for us.

Reflecting on previous discourse, we find ourselves wrapped in the intricate understanding that the Ummah's concept in the Quran expands to envelope all previous prophets and their committed followers. This is rather lucidly evident in the echoes of the Abrahamic prayer. Meanwhile, the Qur'anic verse 'And if Allah had willed, He could have made you [all] one community' subtly but powerfully reaffirms the notion that the diversity of religion and forms of worship are merely elements of a grander Divine design. The same principle applies to differences in language, culture, and ethnicity - their essence reduced to nothing more than avenues 'for getting to know each other,' as articulated in Qur'anic terms. The verse 'And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others,' which encompasses mentions of various places of worship, implies that these diverse modes of worship are far from insignificant in the Divine scheme. Moreover, the verse from Surah Al-Baqarah

provides assurance to believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabeans - those who believed in Allah and the Last Day and performed righteous deeds. Despite some interpreters arguing for its abrogation by the verse 'And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him,' it points to a divine society where diversity in forms of worship does not breed division or narrow-mindedness but brings hope and assurances of success to devoted souls.

The open invitation, 'O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you,' still echoes today, compelling the followers of Muhammad to take up the mantle of leadership for the world's nations. It encourages them to make every possible effort to unite all faith groups in this mission, based on a common word. So we find ourselves at an impasse. Our historical journey has seen the concept of the Ummah, as presented in the Qur'an, diminished and disregarded due to the erosion of thought and action. The feeling of utter solitude in the execution of a global prophetic project and the compulsion to seek refuge in history's periphery underscore the need for a critical reassessment. There is an urgent call for us to reforge and reimagine the theoretical Ummah anew.

In forging a global society, one steeped in justice and fairness, it becomes imperative to lay down foundational principles for embracing the diversity of other nations and communities. Those who hold the understanding that differences in religions and cultures are components of a grand Divine blueprint, and who can confidently echo the truth of past prophets, will undeniably harbour an openness towards other communities. When the Prophet's companions journeyed to Medina following their migration, they found themselves amongst Jewish tribes who deemed themselves guardians of the Mosaic revelation. Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, didn't merely confine his vision to the Ansar and Muhajirun when it

came to charting the course for Medina's communal life. The charter he put forth carried the signatures of the Jewish community as well, establishing a true spirit of inclusivity.

The charter acknowledged every individual as equal under the law, a promise of protection maintained through an impartial judiciary. It stands as a historical testament that gives us a glimpse into how societies of previous prophetic communities can be integrated as equal partners in the vision of a future divine society. The only caveat is the need for a certain readiness on their part to reciprocate our advances, given our status as the recipients of the final revelation.

The Charter, some scholars suggest, takes on the mantle of a Constitution of Medina. Yet, its character veers away from that of a legal manifesto, leaning more towards a covenant, a blueprint with vision. This blueprint envisages the inception of a theoretical community, an 'Ummah', built upon the harmony of diverse religions and cultures, each strand contributing to a whole that embodies a divine identity, all under the stewardship of the era's Prophet.

There's no denying that the Charter carries the words of Prophet Muhammad, yet it remains deliberately ambiguous about the identity of the Prophet. This ambiguity implies an open invitation, suggesting that even if communities from earlier Prophetic times harboured any reservations about Muhammad's Prophethood, they should not be kept outside this envisaged 'Ummah'. In a spirit of inclusivity, the Charter bestows upon these 'People of the Book' rights akin to those given to Muslims, entrusting them with a duty to stand in defence of this theoretical Ummah in times of existential crises, but simultaneously granting them an exemption from the initiation of religious wars.

An introductory reading of the Charter lays bare the intriguing fact that while the idolaters of Mecca were

deliberately kept outside the fold of this theoretical Ummah, the Jews of Medina were embraced as a fundamental part of it. Now, Christians were absent in Medina, but when a delegation from the Christian community of Najran visited at a later time, they were extended the same invitation to partake in this divine endeavour, with the same broad-mindedness and on the principle of mutual concord:

"O People of the Book! Come to a common understanding between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we elevate none from among ourselves as lords and patrons other than God. If they then decline, say: 'At least bear witness that we are Muslims (submitting to God's Will).'" (3:64) This striking gesture underlines the fundamental ethos of the charter - a broad church encompassing all who are willing to walk the path of unity and mutual respect.

The 'Common Word' or "كلمة سواء" perceived as the bedrock of theological accord with various faith factions, primarily orbits around three concepts. To engage in the fresh Prophetic mission and to perpetuate their part in the Abrahamic collective, it is imperative for the 'People of the Book' to embrace monotheism. Additionally, to refrain from all forms of polytheism and, thirdly, to resist appointing amongst themselves deities other than God. The latter directive underlines and hones the first two, embodying a form of unadulterated monotheism, untainted by any hint of idolatry.

To grasp this subtle point, it is crucial to have some understanding of the ecclesiastical systems prevalent amongst Jewish and Christian congregations, where priests and rabbis have assumed a role akin to 'lords and patrons other than God'. In Judaism, Talmudic commentators were regarded as ultimate interpreters of religious law. In contrast, the authority of the

Church was considered indispensable for any authentic interpretation of Christian doctrine. This state of affairs led to sectarian schisms where adherents of a single faith were dispersed into antagonistic theological camps. For Jews, deciphering the true divine commands became a daunting task, and identifying which faction could assure them genuine compliance turned into an enigma.

When an individual embraces entities as "lords besides God" (أرباباً من دون الله), an alarming shift occurs; the freedom of thought and intellect is stifled, the essential connection with the divine, ruptured. This shifts the paradigm from pure monotheism to an embrace of clericalism in its most regressive forms: an unwavering submission to religious figures and a deeply entrenched sectarianism.

Islam has, with good reason, branded institutions such as the Church or sheikhdом as significant obstacles in the journey towards genuine piety. Such obstacles prevent the establishment of a divine society, for they foster a climate of clerical dependence and sectarian rifts. The invitation of the "Common Word" (كلمة سواء) encapsulates the profound desire for unity. The diverse communities of past prophets are urged to converge under the auspices of the last Prophet, cultivating a society where denominational identities merge into a collective divine identification.

Although all prophets have invited their followers to embody the spirit of "Rabbāniyyīn" (ربانيين), their influence was inherently constrained to their communities, epochs, and locales. Now, the mantle fell upon the final Prophet, dispatched as a "bearer of glad tidings and a warner" (بشيراً و نذيراً) and as a "mercy to the worlds" (رحمة للعالمين) for all of humanity, to lay the foundations for a global Rabbani society. This society would be

characterized not by the markers of prophethood, geography, or time but by the distinctive dye of Allah.

Interpreting "Indeed, I am the Messenger of Allah to you all" (إني رسول الله إليكم جميعا) within the context of "The Dye of Allah, and who can dye better than Allah" (صبغة الله ومن أحسن من الله) (صبغة), illuminates an essential truth. The dream of creating a divine society, encompassing all nations of the world, cannot be manifested unless its roots are firmly anchored in a common word. This word must not only resonate with all faith groups but also encapsulate the ultimate aspirations of religious devotion.

The Common Word was not a call for religious conversion, but instead served as a theoretical base for mutual action for pre-existing faith communities.¹⁶ The door of cooperation and involvement remained ajar, even for those who, holding onto their former identities, chose the periphery over pivotal roles at the heart of the movement.

Praise and endorsement for the remnants of the earlier faith communities dot the Quran, asserting that there need be no inferior mental reservation for the virtuous among the People of the Book. Instead, they're invited to join this endeavour, urged to "vie with each other in doing good" - a call to productive and meaningful competition.

When faced with the prophetic mission of Muhammad, the People of the Book fragmented into three discernible factions. A notable number responded to the call, becoming ardent allies and supporters.¹⁷ Yet, some elected to meet the call with denial and opposition. Interestingly, there existed a third group that stubbornly clung to their former faith identities. These were the primary recipients of the Common Word. Regrettably, they opted to languish on the periphery, foregoing a dynamic role at the epicentre of the movement. Their destiny became

intertwined with their lack of presence in the company of their era's Prophet.

Yet, despite this unfortunate stance, the Islamic movement didn't bolt its doors on them. The first Muslims were intimately aware of the divine wisdom - that the variance in faiths and creeds was a facet of human nature and the divine schematic. Freedom to define one's preferences in matters worldly and spiritual is granted to humans. Hence, those insistent on maintaining their former prophetic identities could not be robbed of this right. The Common Word was indeed an invitation to establish a society rooted deeply in monotheism.

In the nascent days of our spiritual tradition, our philosophical landscape was akin to a vast, unbounded desert in which the disparate tribes of prior prophets had staked their claims. The People of the Book, and other such faith groups, were extended the olive branch of salvation and prosperity, contingent upon their faith in a Higher Power and a commitment to acts of righteousness.¹⁸ These Quranic promises cultivated within them a sense of involvement in this sacred prophetic endeavour. Such was our spiritual largeness of spirit that erudite scholars like Al-Biruni and Al-Shahrastani, notwithstanding the chasms of language and culture, accorded the Hindus of India a status analogous to the 'Sabians' – a term referring to the People of the Book, and on this premise, deemed alliances with them to be in alignment with our faith tradition.¹⁹

Our spiritual bonds with communities of other faiths were illustrated in the manner in which the Holy Quran considered their food lawful for us, and ours for them. This led to an unhindered interaction at the societal level. The presence of women from 'People of the Book' within Muslim households, all while preserving their individual religious identities, was seen as a common occurrence. For instance, luminaries such as Uthman

ibn Affan and Talha ibn Ubaydullah were married to Christian women, and Hudhaifa ibn al-Yaman's household included a Jewish wife.²⁰

Historical records also recount the story of a Christian man, Hani bin Hani al-Sheibani, whose four wives converted to Islam during the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab. Not only did Umar maintain the legitimacy of these marriages²¹, but it's also reported that Ali ibn Abi Talib stated that, in such cases, the rights of a dhimmi, or a protected non-Muslim, as a husband should be safeguarded. {إذا أسلمت امرأة اليهودي أو النصراني كان أحق ببيعتها} ²²{لأن له عهداً

Within a protection agreement known as the Ashtiname, given to Saint Catherine's Monastery - a replica of which hangs in the monastery in the Sinai Desert to this day - the Prophet Muhammad provided an explicit assurance to Christians that would remain valid until the end of times. Muslims, it said, would not marry women from the People of the Book without their consent and, moreover, these women would retain the complete freedom to attend church after marriage.²³

These instances from the dawn of Islam provide clear examples of an attitude of tolerance and mutual respect between faiths, a theme prevalent in the historical records.

However, with the passage of time, we observe a perceptible shift in the interpretation of these early incidents, especially during the Abbasid era. A tradition associated with Ibn Abbas, for instance, suggests that the Prophet had proscribed marriages with women from other nations, excluding the faithful Muhajir women.²⁴

Certain narratives even hint that Umar ibn al-Khattab urged Talha and Hudhaifa to sever their matrimonial ties with the women belonging to the People of the Book. Umar's rationale was predicated on the fear that these women's presence



Ashtiname of Muhammad

(The Covenant of the Prophet with the Monks of Mount Sinai)

within Muslim households could potentially trigger a moral perturbation given their different ethical backgrounds.²⁵

As the sands of time drifted, the question of marital unions with the women from the People of the Book found itself entangled in a web of intricate legalistic interpretations, twisting and turning within the realms of religious jurisprudence. A tale tied to Abdullah ibn Umar made its way to the surface, invoking the covenant believed to be traced back to Prophet Muhammad, a covenant that still garners the gaze of visitors at the monastic sanctuary of St. Catherine.

In this narrative, it was suggested that the Prophet saw the permission for such marriages as nullified, overridden by verse 221 from Surah Al-Baqarah. This verse clearly asserts, "And do not marry polytheistic women until they believe."

Ibn Umar, in his interpretation, perceived this repudiation through the lens of a much weightier argument, arguing that there existed no greater form of shirk, the act of associating partners with God, than when a woman declares Jesus, a mere servant of God, as her Lord. In the words of Ibn Umar, "I know of no greater shirk than a woman proclaiming Jesus, merely a servant among God's many servants, as her Lord."²⁶

And what of the Quranic verse which claims, "And [lawful in marriage are] chaste women from among the People of the Book" (5:5)? According to Ibn Umar, it spoke solely of those women hailing from the People of the Book who had willingly embraced Islam.²⁷ These intricate and nuanced interpretations subtly yet irrevocably nudged towards an effective revocation of the early Islamic allowance for marrying women from the People of the Book.

As the narrative evolved, several scholars introduced compelling questions into the mix: What happens when a man, already wedded to a Muslim wife, wishes to marry a woman of the Book? They opined that such an arrangement was not

permissible, for the Quran imposes a requirement of fairness among wives. A woman of the Book could not, by their reasoning, hold equal standing with a Muslim woman, rendering the fulfilment of the Quranic mandate of equality among wives an impossibility. This viewpoint was believed to be in alignment with Ibn Abbas's.²⁸

Adding another layer to this debate was Imam Shafi'i. He interpreted the Quranic reference to "women of the Book" as exclusively pointing to Jewish and Christian women from the tribe of Israel, those whose lineage could be traced back to the original People of the Book. The Arab 'women of the Book' of his era, he contended, didn't descend from the original recipients of the Torah and the Gospel, and therefore, the term "chaste women from the People of the Book" didn't encompass them.²⁹

Malik ibn Anas, another eminent scholar, harboured reservations about marriages with the 'women of the Book'. However, instead of outright rejection on purely religious grounds, he drew attention to the sociocultural and psychological barriers. Imam Malik argued that a woman from the People of the Book, who consumed pork and drank wine, wouldn't be able to rid her mouth of these impurities when sharing intimate moments with her Muslim husband. And, being unfamiliar with Islamic prohibitions, she could potentially feed their children these forbidden items. According to Imam Malik, these were persuasive reasons for discouraging marriage with a woman from the People of the Book.³⁰

As we navigated the complex terrain of Islamic jurisprudence and intellectual thought, the barriers and reservations surrounding the People of the Book gradually faded into obscurity. We found ourselves losing not just our traditional affinity with the People of the Book, but also grappling with internal divisions fuelled by Arab ethnocentrism. It was as

though believers had become strangers in their own religious fraternity.

During the Abbasid era, the message of Muhammad was recast in the mould of Arab imperial paradigms. This shift profoundly influenced our understanding, resulting in stories like those of Salman the Persian, who said to the Arabs, "We accord you respect because the Messenger of Allah bestowed it upon you; we cannot marry your women, nor can we lead your prayers." Such narratives became an integral part of our collective consciousness.³¹

Our understanding of Islam has been shaped by history to such an extent that it now challenges our ability to comprehend Quranic verses concerning the People of the Book in their entirety. Even our most enlightened minds struggle to see the Quran not merely as a chronicle of the past, but as a charter for a new era. The challenge lies not in interpreting verses in isolation or considering them as abrogated but rather, viewing the entire book as a harmonious whole, providing us a sense of direction. We must strive to revisit our interpretation of the Quran, allowing it to breathe new life into our contemporary societies and illuminate our paths with its timeless wisdom.

The journey of our faith, once marked by a profound openness to the People of the Book, began to change. We were stewards of the philosophy of "Be ye Rabbaniyyun", custodians of an openness of heart and mind, unencumbered by reservations or prejudices towards those of different scriptures. During the governance of the Prophet's Companions and even much later, before the reign of Abdul Malik, we readily appointed members of the People of the Book to administrative positions, particularly within the realms of bureaucracy and finance. This was a testament to our respect for their skills and capabilities.

But as we moved into the era of Abdul Malik, our faith began to be shaped more by political forces, gradually moulding into an Arab empire. The consequences were far-reaching, extending into the Abbasid era when the Shu'ubiyya movement accentuated the differences between Arab and non-Arab, Quraysh and non-Quraysh, Muslim and non-Muslim. This once-unseen fracture began to grow, slowly chipping away at our broadminded outlook towards different faith groups. Our inherent acceptance began to wither under the weight of these divisions.

As we navigated this increasingly fragmented landscape, our richly diverse Muslim community, previously marked by its harmonious coexistence with the People of the Book, began to fray at the edges. This was a pivotal shift in our journey, a fundamental reorientation of our understanding and interpretation of our own faith. Our principles and values, once inclusive and accepting, were strained by the realities of political and societal tensions.³²

This was the epoch when the narrative of the extermination of six hundred Jews from Banu Qurayza emerged as a proud embellishment in our chronicles. This orientation intensified during the reign of Al-Mutawakkil, instigating a substantial shift in our perception towards the Ahl-e-Kitab (People of the Book). They were now mandated to wear explicit insignia, such as the cross or the Star of David, making them easily identifiable and distinct. This compulsory differentiation, which we began to view as an emblem of our superiority and triumph, stood in stark contrast to our erstwhile beliefs.³³

As the reign of Al-Mutawakkil unfolded, restrictions amplified. The Ahl-e-Kitab were forbidden from horse riding, an edict symbolising their subjugation. Their offspring were even barred from receiving Quranic education, ostensibly out of deference for its sanctity.³⁴ This shift in the historical narrative

profoundly influenced us, reshaping our interpretation of the Quran, which was now predominantly perceived within the confines of these freshly established traditions.

Our scholars began suggesting that the phrases in the Quranic verse " اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ ", "Ghair-il-Maghdubi 'Alayhim" (not those who have incurred your wrath) and "Walad-Dallin" (nor of those who have gone astray) were specific references to Jews and Christians, respectively.³⁵ This led to a paradigm shift in our historical narratives, casting Jews and Christians as the subjects of divine wrath and those led astray. Consequently, this interpretation not only stereotyped these communities in our discourse but also resulted in a missed opportunity for self-examination and growth that this verse inherently encouraged.³⁶

Thus, we began to read the Holy Quran as a charter of our early Muslim society, primarily concentrating on its admonitions and critiques of the Jews and Christians of that era, while largely sidestepping its guidance regarding our own misconceptions and deviations. This approach considerably restricted our comprehension of the Quran's universal tenets and relevance.

The series of apparently conflicting verses about the People of the Book within the Quran has certainly been a significant challenge for our interpreters. The default approach has been to decipher each verse independently, mostly through the lens of Asbab al-Nuzul - the circumstances of revelation. However, it may be more insightful to contextualize these verses within the broader framework of the Quran itself, rather than confining them to historical instances.

In our understanding, these verses collectively signify the continuation of the prophetic mission under the leadership of

Prophet Muhammad's followers. Upon the bestowal of the final revelation, the mantle of leadership has naturally passed to these followers. As custodians of the last revelation, they have an advantage in charting the course of the prophetic movement. They are guided towards relying on co-believers, as encapsulated in the verse, "لَا تَتَّخِذُوا الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ" (Quran 3:28) - which translates to "Do not take protectors besides the believers."

To protect the Muslim community from falling into suspicion and scepticism regarding the previous prophetic communities, they are advised to steer clear of such doubts. This sentiment is expressed in the verse, "لَيْسُوا سَوَاءً مِّنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ أُمَّةٌ قَائِمَةٌ " (Quran 3:113), underscoring that not all People of the Book are alike, and there are those who stand in devotion, reciting Allah's verses during the night and prostrating in prayer.

World leadership necessitates an understanding of who among the faithful might be most allied and supportive. The Quran hints at this, stating, "And you will surely find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, 'We are Christians.'" (Quran 5:82). Yet, it doesn't preclude the possibility of harmony with the Jewish community, for it is also mentioned, "And among the people of Moses is a community which guides by truth." (Quran 7:159). Every faction linked to the prophets of the past commands our primary attention; indeed, it's part of our mission to develop shared initiatives with them grounded on common principles. However, our broad vision and magnanimity should not be misconstrued. We won't unquestioningly accept the surviving elements of previous prophetic traditions or their proposed action plans; a critical evaluation is essential.

If those claiming to represent past prophets' remnants openly indulge in acts of disbelief, the basis for cooperation dissolves. Within such collaborative efforts, those following Muhammad must offer leadership in thought and practice; the presence of the Quran relegates other holy texts to a non-decisive role.

Equally important, tolerance doesn't equate to capitulation in the divine revelation's progression. If it's a result of mere pragmatism, such tolerance risks misdirecting our collective journey. The Quran warns, "And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion." (Quran 2:120). This highlights the importance of maintaining our unique identity and values, even in the quest for common ground.

In embracing my Muslim identity, I wholeheartedly affirm that the vision of a society where the virtuous spirits of all religious and cultural groups experience a common sense of fulfilment is a deep-seated aspiration of our faith. This harmonious coexistence, where every individual is given equal chances to surpass one another in benevolent actions, is an integral part of our religious yearning.

As adherents of Muhammad's teachings, we are duty-bound to move beyond our national and cultural identities and carve out a shared, global identity. This shared identity should envelop the communal legacy of all previous prophets and their followers, a sentiment beautifully expressed by the Quranic term "Sibghat Allah," often interpreted as being synonymous with the word "Muslim." This paints a picture of an inclusive society bound not by nationality or ethnicity but by the shared values and aspirations fostered by our shared spiritual heritage.

In the days of the Prophet, our triumph hinged upon a universal worldview and a vision of profound depth. People responded to Muhammad's call and united to build a world

marked only with the hue of God, "Sibghat Allah". These individuals were not distinguished from their peers by outward characteristics such as clothing, social customs, language or tribal affiliations, but by their worldview. However, the transformation of their hearts and vision endowed them with an expansive perspective and a spirit of magnanimity. This allowed them to prioritize the welfare of the global community over narrow national or local interests. This is how Islam fundamentally altered their inner world. If someone emphasizes adopting the externals - their habits, attire, and culture - over this internal transformation, it cannot be asserted that they are adhering to the path of Muhammad's followers or superficially resembling the Quraysh who were Muhammad's contemporaries.

In the era of the Prophet, declaring faith in Muhammad essentially meant disavowing false loyalties and identities, pledging oneself to the establishment of a global society. This internal shift of the heart and vision was deemed sufficient to secure a place in the sanctified caravan of Muhammad's followers. There was no need to adopt a Muslim name or attire, as there was no established identity associated with Muslim names, no concept of Islamic dress, and no familiarity with the concept of conversion as we understand it today. Upon joining the Prophet's circle, an individual's outward appearance remained unaltered, but their inner world underwent a seismic shift. They were imbued with a new thought paradigm and a fresh perspective on life. This transformation of heart and vision was what was known as faith, demonstrated not through superficial changes but through actions, through living this new worldview.

Religion, through the lens of history, can often be seen as a two-edged blade. It has the power to rally people, fostering a universal human bond that transcends boundaries. Yet, its flip

side is a potential for division, as excessive emphasis on rituals and dogmas can splinter humanity into sects and factions.

Interestingly, within the narrative of various religious sects, a common theme emerges: initial proponents of monotheism can gradually succumb to the delusion of exclusivity. This illusion places them as God's unique confidants, to whom salvation is eternally assured. A Quranic verse encapsulates this: "And the Jews say, 'The Christians have nothing [true] to stand on...' " (Quran 2:113)

However, Islam distinguishes itself by resisting such exclusivity. Instead, it boldly proclaims that one's faith – be it Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, or Sabeian – does not negate their good deeds or their potential for salvation. Fear and sorrow are not the lot of other righteous groups (Quran 2:62). This stands as a testimony to Islam's expansive, encompassing worldview, one that looks beyond borders of religion.

Islam, since its inception, has propounded the idea that salvation is not solely the province of Prophet Muhammad and his followers.³⁷ This perspective arises from the fact that their teachings are not a new religious revelation, but rather the final link in a lineage that stretches back through Jesus and Moses, Jacob and Ishmael, all the way to Abraham and Noah. The Quran itself presents Muhammad's message as a rejuvenation of the Abrahamic faith. True devotees of God are seen across all cultures and religions. Whether they hail from the lineage of Abraham or reside outside that sphere, like Zoroastrians and Sabeans, they all are deserving of God's mercy due to their piety. This is an understanding that even the early Muslims held, recognizing that varying forms of worship and different expressions of devotion found across cultures, are all esteemed in the view of a God who sees His servants in all of their diversity. Verses such as "And if Allah did not repel some men by means of others" (Quran 2:251)

underscore this idea. In every place of worship, whether it be a synagogue, church, monastery, or mosque, the name of God is exalted. Given this, it is improbable for a Muslim to aspire to a world unified under one faith or mode of worship. From the outset, Muslims have been prepared to facilitate a broad fellowship encompassing all faith groups, a testament to the religion's inherent universalism.

Conclusion

ISLAM, BY ITS VERY nature, defines itself as a faith rather than a sect. It aims to free individuals from oppressive structures and remove any intermediaries between the human and the divine. At any point in history, should its followers begin to feel a diminishing sense of intellectual and practical freedom, they must recognize that they are no longer operating within the expansive realm of faith but have instead become prisoners of dogmatic sectarianism. For these individuals, religion has become an idol that obstructs their direct relationship with the one true God. They find themselves in a tragic circumstance similar to that of the worshippers who show physical signs of devoutness, yet their hearts are bereft of awe for the divine. The Quran warns of such a condition in a verse, saying, "So woe to those who pray, but are unmindful of their prayers" (Quran 107:4-5).

Today, those who aspire to tread the path of divine surrender must shift their focus from the confines of sectarian beliefs to the broader framework of faith, as outlined in the most reliable source - the Holy Quran. This text serves as the only definitive reference point in our times. Interpretations provided by various schools of thought or amassed traditions should not be seen as the final arbiters in understanding

religion. They are interpretive tools rather than legislative guides. It becomes imperative to examine historical narratives, jurisprudential judgments, and compilations of traditions under the scrutiny of the Quran. Interpretations of scholars and traditionalists from the past should be analysed within the circumference of Quranic thought. Subsequently, ideas that find resonance with the Quranic testament should be embraced, and those devoid of Quranic endorsement should be regarded as contentious.

It is important to remember that while we may decipher the Quran without the aid of scholars and traditionalists, without the Quran, we cannot accurately interpret jurisprudence, traditions, or historical accounts. The Quran possesses a pivotal role, while all other sources assume secondary positions. In the quest to comprehend the essence of religion, the Quran's judgment should be acknowledged as final, exerting an eternal and unchanging authority over all other sources.

Regrettably, the majority of attempts to comprehend religion have shied away from assigning this decisive and ultimate position to the Quran. We have been ensnared by the false belief that the Quran cannot be understood without the lens of jurisprudence, traditions, and historical accounts. However, these disciplines are secondary, historical, and speculative. They may serve as auxiliary knowledge but should not be granted a permanent role in determining religious understanding. Historical accounts and traditions are not equipped to untangle the meanings of divine revelation, nor can they serve as enduring tools for its comprehension and interpretation. The elevated status of revelation necessitates that we prioritize it above all other sources and embrace its timeless truths without hesitation or contestation.

Imagine an intellectual revolution, one that would allow us to revisit the understanding of Islam from a fresh perspective,

free from the interpretations of jurists and traditionalists, and instead rooted in divine revelation. This revolution would be transformative, breaking free from a thousand years of entrenched thought patterns and placing us anew within the dynamic, liberating context of Prophet Muhammad's era. Consider a form of Islam free from sectarian divisions like Shia, Sunni, Ibadi, Ismaili. Think of a faith uncoloured by texts like Al-Shafi'i's *Al-Risalah* or Abu Hanifa's exploration of *Kalam* as a method of contemplation. In this world, the disputes between scholars of tradition and scholars of theology are not yet hardened into religious doctrine. Canonical Hadith compilations aren't given undue reverence, Sufi shrines aren't yet a concept, and our lexicon remains untouched by the jargon of religious sciences.

Think of an era where the interpretations of Islam by luminaries such as Zahiri, Shafi'i, Tabari, Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah, and others haven't yet shaped the faith's discourse. Rediscovering such a form of Islam, untangled from these myriad deviations and confusions, could bring about results reminiscent of those observed in Islam's earliest days. If we could attain this, we'd be able to move beyond the artificial division between religious and secular knowledge, ending the dichotomy between religion and worldly life. This could revitalize our global leadership role, which has been stunted for centuries.

Bidding adieu to the inherited, constructed version of Islam would shift our focus from a limited selection of commandment verses to the holistic view of the Quran as our primary point of reference. This would rekindle our relationship with the natural world and the verses of discovery, opening up avenues of thought and exploration that have been dormant for centuries. In such a scenario, followers of Muhammad could once again

reclaim their role as stewards of the universe and representatives of the best community.

Let's envisage a form of Islam where all sources except the Quran are viewed through a lens of secondary importance, bearing interpretative and historical values. In this landscape, the divine voice eclipses the debates of jurists and the declarations of Hadith scholars, ushering in a radically new world. This fresh start demands that we must muster the courage to sculpt a novel approach to contemplation, dissection, and interpretation. Primarily, we must recognize that the rhetorical interpretive approach, which has held us captive for centuries, isn't the sole, inherent pathway for deducing and extrapolating meanings. This approach falls short of honouring the full dimensions of language as it's constantly leveraged its constraints and potential interpretive scopes, prompting us to interpret the Holy Quran as a book of law rather than a guide. Indeed, language is akin to a slippery mould, where a substantial part slips beyond the reader's reach. We can only overcome this constraint when we embrace the practice of reading the Holy Quran not as a codex of laws, a medical manual, or a testament to scientific wonders, but rather as a beacon of enlightenment and guidance.

Undoubtedly, viewing the Holy Quran as a guide to current practice can lead to potential pitfalls. However, these will be the sort of pitfalls where their nature of being incorrect is transparent, thus always offering a chance for rectification. They will not be like the venerated mistakes of our forebears that we no longer have the courage to correct due to their gained sanctity.

Despite the risks and challenges that we, being human, face in engaging directly with the Quran, it is essential that we muster the courage to revisit the Quran with a fresh perspective. In doing so, we aim to rediscover that divine voice which has

been distorted and lost amidst centuries of interpretative writings. Conversely, if we continue to lean on the interpretations of ancient jurists to uncover the divine voice, we run the risk of creating God in our own image, much like we've done in the past. In essence, we risk falling into a form of 'Mormonism', hearing only the echoes of our desires and biases in the divine voice.

Postscripts

Reconstructing the Ummah Muslimah

ISLAM IS NOT AN IDENTITY that any group can claim as its sole patent; rather, it is an attitude of willing and unconditional submission to God, a door open for all those seeking solace in the oneness of God. This call for willing submission, expressed throughout history by the true prophets of God and their rightful followers, must be carried forward by Muslims of our time. However, this does not imply that submitters in other prophetic traditions will be denied a role in this modern-day venture. A movement calling for world revolution, for establishing a global family comprising the children of one God, cannot afford to shut its door on the submitters found in other traditions.

No objective reading of the Qur'an can miss the dominant theme that all prophets of God, from Abraham to Muhammad or before them, were calling people to worship one God, to embrace the life example of submitters, the Muslim haneef. No wonder then that the Qur'an makes it a precondition of faith to believe in all the prophets as one and at the same time. The believers are asked to look at the prophets not as the founders of a specific Ummah but as upholders of the same divine mission: لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِّنْهُمْ ("We make no distinction between any of them"). In the divine scheme, they are inseparable; together,

they constitute a galaxy of divinely inspired leaders of humanity. They are not to be understood in isolation. The Qur'an makes it an inseparable part of the Muslim faith to believe in all the earlier prophets and what has come down to us through them. The remnants of the earlier prophetic communities, we are told, are our natural allies. Since Muhammad has not brought a new message but came to revive the Abrahamic religion, believers are encouraged to find in him the convergence of the entire prophetic tradition.

Muhammad did not found a new Ummah. Far from creating a new identity or name, the new believers were instructed to abandon all pseudo-religious identities, whether Jewish or Christian. Those among the Jews and Christians who claimed to be the true inheritors of the Abrahamic heritage, or who were intent on converting others to their group, were clearly told that there was no value in mere labels. Abraham was not identified as a Jew or a Christian; he was a submitter to God. Therefore, all those willing to submit to one Lord were urged to follow his example [2:135]. Had Muhammad and his followers adopted a new identity distinct from Jewish or Christian ones, this would have contradicted his role as a prophet for all humanity. Unlike the calls for conversion to Judaism or Christianity (كُونُوا هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَى), the new believers were encouraged to adhere to the 'true religion of Abraham, who worshiped no god but Him' [6:161]. In contrast to Jews and Christians, who placed great importance on their religious labels, the new believers were expected to progress through history without such tags. The Qur'anic call to be 'God-centered' (كُونُوا رَبَّانِيِّينَ) or to 'take on the color of God' (صِبْغَةَ اللَّهِ) emphasizes that no prophet has ever sought to establish his own sect or to have people submit to him personally. The Qur'an repeatedly asserts that all prophets, despite their differences in

time and place, essentially preached the same message [3:68]. With Muhammad embodying the essence of the Abrahamic tradition, who better to emulate? [3:68].

The depiction of Muhammad in the Qur'an positions him not as a cult leader, but as a global prophet—a Warner to all (كَافَّةً) and a mercy to all mankind (رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ). In the early era of Islam, the term 'Ummah Muhammadiya' was not used, unlike during the zenith of earlier prophetic communities where cultic identities were attached to Jews, Christians, or Buddhists. It took centuries for these personality-based identities to evolve. All true prophets of God strove to connect people to the one God, to foster a just society centered around God alone (لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ فِي الْمَلِكِ), and to unify people under the Tawhidi paradigm as children of one God. The prophet is not merely a visionary; he is endowed with cosmic knowledge and a meta-cosmic vision (الْكِتَابِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ). He is not expected to form a cult or call people to worship him ('كُونُوا عِبَادًا لِّي') but is tasked with guiding people to worship one God and to identify themselves solely as His servants (كُونُوا رِبَّانِيَّيْنَ [3:79]). Like the submitters of old, the new believing community was also instructed to accept all prophets as a precondition of their faith, refraining from preferring one prophet over another [3:84].

The revival of a universal Ummah, centered solely on God, represented a vision far from ordinary. The call to become rabbanin, or to connect directly with the Divine Source, generated an extraordinary surge of energy and ecstasy. As long as the new believers maintained awareness of their Rabbani identity, they viewed themselves as part of a grand prophetic tradition. They became an open door for all souls seeking solace, offering refuge. This strong emphasis on a God-based identity provided the new believers with an ideological advantage,

quickly transforming them into a formidable force. Although their roots lay in Arab traditions, their transformed outlook made such a significant impact that, wherever they went, they were seen as a group united by their devotion to one God, transcending racial, cultural, linguistic, and geographical distinctions.

However, after the passing of the first generation of Muslims, a gradual shift occurred, leading to the misconception that Arab culture was intrinsically linked to Islam. Some even viewed the splendor of the Abbasid Empire as the culmination of the Rabbani movement. Arab tribalism, or *asabiyah*, became a model for subsequent generations of Muslims. Moreover, the transformation of the *mawaali* system from a fraternal association into a social protectorate began to suggest that non-Arabs were relegated to the margins of the Islamic movement. An empire built on Arab tribalism, asserting the superiority of certain Arab clans, left little space for members of other prophetic communities to participate. The original God-centric vision that embraced all was now distorted into a community centered around the personality of a prophet. This shift represented a misalignment of loyalty, or *ghuloo* as termed in the Qur'an. Framing the Ummah around an Arab prophet diminished the new believers to merely another community, akin to the Jews and Christians, and just another fragment of the vast Abrahamic tradition. This closing of the Muslim mind not only transformed them internally but also altered the world around them.

The Ummah found itself on a path of relentless decline, with its scholars retreating into an intellectual exile. Yet, the so-called golden age of Abbasid Baghdad, the splendor of Muslim Spain and Mughal India, along with the military might of the Ottoman Empire, crafted illusions masking this continuous downtrend. This period marked a paradox where the Muslim nation, the Ummah Muhammadiyah, effectively subdued the

foundational principles of Islam. The rise of a cult around Islam, transforming into a Muhammadan nation, heralded the erosion of an ideology-driven Ummah. The exclusive identity of Muslims, once solely defined by the "color of God," was no longer paramount. Enclosed within the psychological confines of their own construction, Muslims elevated the Ummah to the center of their devotion, inadvertently idolizing it. This cult worship deteriorated into sub-sects, compelling the new believers to grasp at novel identities for allegiance. The internecine conflicts among Shiites and Sunnis, Hanafis and Shafe'is, precipitated not only the downfall of Muhammadan Empires but also sowed ideological turmoil so profound that discerning the true embodiment of Islam became a near-impossible task. The pervasive sense that something was fundamentally amiss within the House of Islam was widely recognized. However, attempts to amend the situation largely concentrated on reorienting the Ummah Muhammadiyah itself, ironically seeing the very source of its problems as their solution.

Rather than adopting the cultic concept of Ummah Muhammadiyah, the Qur'an refers to the term Ummah Muslimah. In Abraham's heartfelt prayer, we find him pleading: "Our Lord! Make us submitters to You and from our descendants, a nation of submitters to You" (أُمَّةً مُّسْلِمَةً لَّكَ) [2:128]. Abraham imparted this call to submission to his sons, as did Jacob, who advised, "My sons! Do not die except in a state of submission" [2:133]. The Qur'anic vision of the Ummah Muslimah encompasses all those who submit, regardless of their geographical, historical, or civilizational contexts. It forms a resplendent assembly of all prophets and their true followers, including the People of the Cave, blessed and protected by God, female exemplars such as Mary, mother of Jesus, and Pharaoh's wife, alongside all other believing nations, whether explicitly

mentioned in the Qur'an or not. This collective represents the expansive Ummah of Islam.

Despite these unequivocal declarations, some may still claim Abraham was a Jew or a Christian, to which the Qur'an responds, "Say, 'Do you know better, or does God?'" [2:140], challenging such misconceptions. Equating Abraham with Judaism or Christianity, or viewing Muhammad as the founder of a Ummah Muhammadiyah, does a grave disservice, akin to "concealing the testimony given by Allah" [2:140]. And to those asserting that the contemporary Ummah Muhammadiyah encompasses the entirety of the Ummah Muslimah, can they justify excluding Abraham, his progeny, Aasiya, and Mary from the Islamic community?

Salvation is reserved for those who submit: Individuals who surrender to the Almighty and follow the righteous path need not fret over their salvation. This guarantee is extended to all who submit to one Lord, thereby forming the vast Ummah of submitters. Conversely, those born into the Muslim tradition yet deviate towards a non-Abrahamic path forfeit this assurance:

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ [5:17]

Or

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ثَلَاثَةٌ [5:73]

Verses like these clearly indicate that mere group identity does not ensure salvation, nor does blood relation within a group of submitters or the Ummah Muslimah suffice for it. This is why the claims of the Jews and Christians – the traditional Muslims of Muhammad's time – asserting they were the beloved children of God, the chosen ones, were outrightly dismissed [5:18].

The term "Ummah Muslimah" in the Qur'an denotes a broadly inclusive House of submitters, a notion further emphasized in Surah Al-Anbiya, where it is proclaimed:

"Indeed, this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord, so worship Me" [21:92]. This community includes a long lineage of submitters ranging from Abraham to Lot, Solomon, Jacob, Ishmael, Idris, Dhul-Kifl, Jonah, Zechariah, John, and Mary. Despite originating from one single group, their later generations have fragmented into various sects: "But they divided their affair among themselves" [21:93]. The Qur'an repeatedly underscores that all those who submit to one God form a single Ummah, contrasting with those entangled in sectarian divisions or cult worship. This concept is encapsulated in the declaration that these people are one nation [2:213] and reaffirmed by the statement "Indeed, this community of yours is one community" [21:92]. Another profound illustration is the description of Abraham as a nation unto himself: "Indeed, Abraham was a nation" (إِنَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ كَانَ أُمَّةً), highlighting him as an exemplar for Muslims. Abraham's unquestionable submission, free from founding any cult or associating with Jewish or Christian identities, sets the standard. Those who emulate him are inherently part of the expansive Ummah of Islam.

The broader concept of Ummah Muslimah was operational during the golden age of Islam, a period marked not just by intellectual and cultural flourishing but also by episodes of conflict and confrontation. Even in times of war and intense struggle, when Muslims faced direct challenges from Jewish and Christian communities, the vision of a wider Ummah of Islam remained unshaken. The Qur'an repeatedly cautions against overgeneralization, reminding us that among the People of the Book, there are those who steadfastly adhere to the truth:

وَمِنْ قَوْمٍ مُّؤْمِنِينَ أَمَّاتٌ يَّهْدُونَ بِالْحَقِّ [7:159]

Among them are also God-fearing, kind souls who stand all night long reciting the word of God and prostrating themselves in adoration [3:113]. As group identity is not a source of

salvation, it cannot be an excuse for condemnation either. "Those among you who are more God-conscious are more worthy in the sight of God" [49:13]. "On that day, every soul will have to carry his own burden alone" [74:38]. Such verses, then, are sufficient pointers to the fact that submitters to God together constitute one nation, and for them, God's favor is guaranteed: "Those who believe and those of the Jews, Christians, and the Sabians who believe in Allah and the Last Day and work righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" [2:62]. This verse of the Qur'an, extending the scope of salvation to the followers of other prophets, to the submitters of other faith groups, has been an enigma to many Muslim ulema and jurists and a matter of irreconcilable controversy. While Abu Hamid Ghazali, Rashid Rida, and Tabatabaei believed that God's mercy would be extended to the submitters of other faith groups, for an overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars, this notion was considered nearly blasphemous. "Where then does Muhammad stand in the scheme of things?" they quipped. The more Muslims started looking at Muhammad as the founder of a new Ummah, the increasingly difficult it became for them to find in him the convergence of the great Abrahamic tradition. They also lost sight of the fact that Islam, the chosen deen of God propagated by all true prophets throughout history, is essentially a God-centered religion. It was St. Augustine's influence in theology that made salvation almost impossible without Jesus. Those who fashion Muhammad in a similar light or place him on a much higher pedestal of intercession are, in fact, guilty of operating within an Augustinian framework. Unlike Augustinian Christianity, where salvation is the sole right of Christians, the Qur'an discourages humans from passing judgments on this sensitive issue. We have to keep our mouths shut not only about the People of the Book, who are taken as our natural allies but

even about those who are guilty of committing shirk. It is God's prerogative, we are told: "on that day, God will bring forth His verdict about them" [22:17]. In the same way, God created people in different clans and races so that they can be mutually recognized [49:13], it is also His scheme that His obedient children are known with varying labels. "Had God so willed," we are told, "He would have raised us as one Ummah," but it is His plan to test us in what has come down to us. We are, therefore, exhorted to mutually compete in acts of goodness [5:48]. If submitters to one God find themselves in divergent traditions of submission, this diversity should not be a cause for worry. The Qur'an testifies to the fact that the Torah and Injil have come down from the same source, and there too, one may find guidance and light. Those claiming to inherit different prophetic traditions should not sink so low in their disputes as to indulge in deciding who is going to hell or who can be sure of salvation. Instead, what we are all required to do is to "strive in a stiff competition of virtues; for God alone is the goal of us all, it is He who will show us the truth of the matters in which we dispute" [5:48]. Having been aware of the unique position of Muhammad in history, the first generation of Muslims never diverged on such issues. Instead, they considered the remnants of earlier prophets as their natural ideological allies, with whom a common program of action could be worked out: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God" [3:64]. Assigned to a leadership role as they were, the early Muslims displayed marked openness in embracing submitters of different hues to their fold. The door of the new Islamic movement was open to all those willing to compete in acts of goodness. However, those still trapped in sectarian thinking or who attached undue importance to their

Jewish or Christian identity were reminded that they would find no reward for themselves unless they adhered to the teachings of the Torah [5:68]. Though claiming to represent the Jewish or Christian faith, they are the people who have taken their identity as God and sunk into cult worship. No good is to be expected from such closed-minded people. Hence, it is advisable to stay away from them: "O submitters! Take not the Jews and Christians for your friends and protectors" [5:51]. Such pronouncements, however, should not be taken as a general statement. For we are reminded in the Qur'an: "Not all of them are alike: of the People of the Book are an upright community; they recite the words of God all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration" [3:113]. Since the early Muslims considered the People of the Book as their natural allies, they found no fault in socially mixing with them. The Qur'an had made their food lawful for Muslims. And as Muslim men were encouraged to take believing women as their wives on the condition of piety, so they were also allowed to marry chaste women from among the People of the Book [5:5]. In a God-centered society founded on taqwa alone, where the call for becoming Rabbani or God-oriented had attained such a high pitch, none could have dreamt that one day the same people would undergo such a thorough transformation that it would be difficult for them to look at themselves as upholders of the Rabbani identity, and being Muslims would come to be regarded as wearing a cultural identity rather than the pure unconditional submission. Owing to some historical factors and political upheavals, unfortunately, this great tragedy befell Muslims. Gradually, the Muslim national identity took precedence over their Rabbani identity. This initiated the process of the closing of the Muslim mind. Soon, Muslims found themselves surrounded by a plethora of doubtful historical material and

unreliable traditions that would shape the new Muslim identity in the centuries to come.

This transformation of a people, designated to lead history until the end of time, from Ummah Muslimah to Ummah Muhammadiyah, fostered a new set of beliefs about the Ummah and its prophet. Similar to previous nations, Muslims began to take pride in their cultic identity and portrayed their prophet as superior. As adherents of the Qur'an, they once found the Jewish claim—that they would only be touched by fire for a limited time and that heaven was their guaranteed final destination, regardless of their actions—illogical. However, they developed similar notions about themselves. Legends shaping the new Muslim mindset depict Muhammad as possessing an exceptional ability to intercede and secure salvation for his Ummah. On the day when Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets refrain from interceding, Muhammad, bearing the banner of God's praise, is envisioned as guiding his followers en masse to heaven. Some narratives suggest that this mass entry of Muslims into heaven would evoke a sentiment akin to that surrounding the Israelite prophets.

This conception of an unjust God and a biased prophet forced Muslims into a psychological cocoon of their own creation, a significant misstep. By elevating Muhammad to a super prophet status, they inadvertently reduced him to a cult hero, inadvertently disparaging him. The Qur'an presents him as a blessing to all humanity, yet, according to some fabrications, his final concerns were solely for his own people, repeatedly uttering "ummati ummati" (my people, my people) on his deathbed. These traditions imply that even on the Day of Judgment, he would seek to influence God's judgment in favor of his followers. Viewing the prophet as solely serving Ummah Muhammadiyah raises questions about his followers' ability to act as warners to all or to strive for the general welfare of humanity.

Whither Muslim Identity?

AROUND FORTY YEARS AGO, Wilfred Cantwell Smith made a claim on Islam, a claim which Muslims thought was exclusively theirs. Few at the time could foresee that by declaring himself a Muslim, he was sparking a significant ideological debate within the religious sphere. Smith was not an average Christian; he was a distinguished scholar well-versed in Islamic theological debates concerning Muslim identity. Believing that the core of Islamic teachings is submission to God, he felt, perhaps sincerely, that his devout Christian faith also classified him as a Muslim in essence. For Smith, Islam represented an attitude of submission rather than an ideological label to wear. The concept of Islam as portrayed in traditionalist views did not resonate with him. Yet, it was inconceivable for him to declare in Arabic "lastu bi Muslim" (I am not a submitter). As a devout individual, how could he deny being a submitter, or a Muslim, in spirit?

Smith's era was characterized by a post-colonial sentiment, with Muslims worldwide viewing Islam more as an ummatic identity rather than a universal salvific mission. Consequently, Smith's assertion of being a Muslim received a lukewarm response from the ulema at the time. Even his trusted pupil, Mushirul Haq, who often engaged with Smith's definition of Islam, maintained a cautious distance. As a student at Temple University, Haq had the chance to observe Smith up close and

was undoubtedly influenced by his devotion and piety. However, the question remained: Was Smith truly a Muslim in the linguistic sense of the term? Addressing this issue was not only risky but also posed a theological dilemma for Haq. Smith's claim of being a Muslim within the Christian tradition reignited a longstanding debate among Muslim theologians, dating back to the early centuries of Islam: What defines a Muslim, faith or practice?

Measuring one's faith is inherently fraught with dangers, as is any attempt to define it. The *fiqhi* or legal definition of religion can be as misleading and inconclusive as its various manifestations might suggest. Nearly all major religions, Islam being the notable exception, are recognized today by names not originally given by their founders. Jesus did not anticipate that his followers would be called Christians or his salvific mission labeled Christianity. This pattern holds true for Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other significant religions. Most of these terms were coined by outsiders, thus failing to capture the essence of the respective religious traditions.

The early Orientalists attempted to understand the Muslim religion through Christian parameters, initially labeling it as Mohammadanism. It was only later that serious Western scholars of Islam recognized that Islam did not revolve around the cult of Muhammad but claimed continuity with the great Abrahamic tradition. Smith was part of this enlightened era and was surprised to learn that the term "Islam," used in the Qur'an to broadly encompass all submitters, had been exclusively claimed by the Muslim nation. Smith also observed the intense dispute in Pakistan between the Qadianis and mainstream Muslims, which highlighted the identity issue. As the Munir Commission Reports documented, the ulema could not provide a conclusive and unanimously agreed-upon definition of who a

Muslim was. If Islam is indeed an attitude, and one's Muslimness hinges on their submission to God, then is it possible to find Muslims outside the traditional House of Islam? This was a logical question that Smith and other earnest students of Islam contended with. For Smith, claiming to be a Muslim might have been an act of intellectual boldness, but for us, any redefinition of the term would undeniably lead to a paradigm shift.

Who, then, qualifies as a Muslim? Is Islam exclusively the religious heritage of the Muslim nation, or might there be other rightful claimants to this Abrahamic legacy? Attempting to provide a definitive or authoritative answer to this profoundly intricate question might misrepresent the essence of the inquiry itself. Let's delve deeper. The human mind utilizes language as a mechanism for thought and perception. Humans uniquely possess the capacity to name phenomena, setting them apart from other creatures. However, the utility of words as instruments of thought and expression is limited, particularly because words are not static; they evolve. Conversely, for God, language serves merely as a means of communication. While God can undoubtedly convey sublime intentions in human language, such a translation would bear a divine mark of perfection, potentially eluding human comprehension. To reconcile the disparity between divine intent and human language, God does not diminish His divinity. Instead, He invites us to grasp the profound intent in terms we can understand: "Read! In the name of thy Lord who created you." Humanity is constantly reminded of its humble beginnings, yet it is also encouraged to engage with the text independently: "Read! For thy Lord is most generous."

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ [96:1-3]

This motivated reading must acknowledge from the start that the Qur'an is no ordinary book, and that no humanly comprehensible language can fully capture the divine intent, nor can any exegete entirely encompass its meaning. At best, what humanity can do is to grasp the essence of the intent, thereby finding direction for their spiritual journey. Conversely, approaching the text as a legal document, extracting all possible dos and don'ts, is likely to end in gaining no deeper wisdom. The Qur'an tells us that the Israelites were commanded to slaughter a calf. However, instead of promptly obeying the divine command, they asked numerous questions to specify their search for a calf. This pursuit of precision is certainly contrary to the hermeneutics of divine text.

In the Qur'an, a *fiqhi* mind struggles to find a precise definition of Muslim identity. Instead, God invites us to be submitters in essence, to be known as the people of God (*rabbani*), where the attitude itself becomes the identity. Claiming to be a Jew or a Christian is not deemed acceptable. The faithful are urged to adopt "the color of God, for who is better than God in color? It is Him we worship" [2:138]. Schism and Tawhid cannot coexist. Submitters to God cannot truly uphold their claims unless they abandon their respective group identities to form a universal brotherhood of *rabbani*, the people of God. The Qur'an frequently reminds us that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus were neither Jews nor Christians. They all belonged to one group of submitters, united by their act of submission, which bestowed upon them their identity and name:

مِلَّةَ أَبِيكُمْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ هُوَ سَمَّاكُمُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَفِي هَذَا لَتَكُونُوا الشُّهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ

[22:78]

The Qur'anic exhortations such as *كونوا ربانيين* (be the people of God) and *صبغة الله* (take the color of God) are clear

signals that the Qur'an aims to forge a universal society where narrow group identities are dissolved into a collective identity of submission to one God. This global brotherhood, which the Qur'an describes as Ummah Muslimah, is an inclusive term that embraces all the prophets and their genuine followers. The prayer of Abraham, "O my Lord, raise from among us a nation of submitters," explicitly excludes the transgressors who might claim lineage to him but do not embody the spirit of submission:

وَإِذِ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ ۖ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا ۚ قَالَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي ۖ قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ [2:124]

Redefining Muslim identity is not a mere academic exercise; rather, our future hinges on it. Today, in the twenty-first century, as "patented" Muslims find themselves in a precarious position and so-called revivalist movements seem to have lost their momentum, a period of profound introspection is urgently needed. We were once liberators, champions of the ultimate salvific mission. Now, we stand so debilitated that arresting our own decline seems out of reach. What led to this predicament? How did we reach this point? Addressing these questions requires immense courage for genuine self-reflection, and perhaps, the unabashed forthrightness of a simpleton to articulate it. Indeed, we profess to carry forward a universal mission, yet our actions align more closely with the Jews and Christians of the Prophet's era. Similar to them, we focus on broadening our social base, coaxing conversions to our cultural identity rather than truly calling people to God. If that is the case, one must ponder the appeal of such an insular project to outsiders.

Unlike today's communitarian Muslims, the first generation of Muslims possessed a universal vision. Outwardly, they resembled other Arabs of their time, speaking the same

language, wearing similar clothes, and maintaining beards akin to their contemporaries. Yet, their worldview set them apart, aligning them with the mission of creating a bias-free, global society of submitters. Islam's transformative power worked from within; for them, embracing Muhammad as the prophet of God signified abandoning old clan identities without necessitating any external modifications. They weren't required to adopt distinctive dress codes or change their names. At that time, the concepts of "Islamic names" or institutionalized conversion processes, along with specific formulas for professing one's faith, were non-existent. Embracing Islam essentially meant wholeheartedly supporting Muhammad's mission and joining the prophetic struggle, irrespective of the challenges. Back then, faith was demonstrated through actions rather than verbal declarations or eloquent formulas; it was a matter of deeds over words.

The early Muslims recognized their role as bearers of the Last Revelation and world leaders, but this did not imply the end of other faith communities' roles. They felt compelled to invite these communities to willingly participate and collaboratively develop a common program of action or "kalimatun sawa," as termed by the Qur'an. However, political upheavals during the Abbasid era in Baghdad began to alter this dynamic. The rise of the mawalis (naturalized Arabs) in social strata and the predominance of Ahl al-Kitab (People of the Book) and other groups in administrative roles made some Arab tribes feel marginalized. It was in this period that stories were concocted to undermine the pluralistic social fabric, including the fabricated account of Banu Quraiza, which claimed that the Prophet ordered and oversaw the execution of a 600-member Jewish tribe—a story without historical basis. Additionally, discussions of "Omerian stipulations" regarding the People of the Book, attributed ambiguously to Caliph Omar or another

Omar, began to shape attitudes towards other faith communities. Narratives emphasizing the supremacy of the Quraysh tribe and the call for Arab hegemony also emerged, reflecting a shift where Arab identity, rather than Islamic values, started to define Muslim identity.

From being a universal brotherhood of submitters, the community evolved into an Arab-Muslim identity, with Islam becoming the ideology of the burgeoning Arab Empire. Initially, Muslims served the Islamic mission, but with the empire's establishment, Islam began to serve the empire's needs. The prolonged conflict with the Crusaders further impacted Muslim perceptions of Christianity, leading to a binary worldview: the abode of Islam versus the abode of disbelief. This outlook discouraged travel or settlement in non-Muslim lands, contributing to intellectual isolation. By the time colonial powers rose, the Muslim world, cloistered and unaware of global changes, found it too late to adapt effectively.

This period marked a significant turning point, leading to a contraction of the Muslim mind, limiting awareness and engagement with the evolving world outside Islamic lands.

To initiate a revival, we must journey back from cultural Islam to pure Islam. This requires a critical re-evaluation of exegetical writings on the diverse interpretations and manifestations of Muslim identity. A modest start could be based on the following foundational premises:

- At the core of the Islamic mission is the objective to establish a global society of submitters (rabbanin). The followers of Muhammad, marked by the color of God, are expected to exalt God's glory in harmony with other faith communities. It is crucial to remember that Muhammad represents the culmination of the prophetic tradition, not to establish a new Ummah but to rejuvenate the Abrahamic faith. The Qur'anic

notion of Ummah Muslimah is an inclusive term that embraces all of God's prophets and their genuine followers.

- The principle of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), as outlined in the Qur'an, delineates the ideological division between submitters and rejecters. However, this does not imply that submitters cannot exist outside the traditional cultural House of Islam. Muslims are not merely a cultural entity, nor are they meant to develop in isolation. The Arab culture, which over centuries inadvertently shifted the followers of Muhammad from Ummah Muslimah to Ummah Muhammadiyah, should not be considered an intrinsic element of Islam.

- Due to the influence of exegetical literature, the Muslim perspective on some of the Qur'an's seemingly conflicting verses, especially those pertaining to the People of the Book, has been muddled. Exegetes often employ specific historical contexts to reconcile these contradictions, which they perceive as pointing in different directions. I firmly believe that analyzing a verse in isolation or within a specific historical context is a flawed approach. Allowing history to overshadow Revelation can only lead to misinterpretations. It is imperative to re-examine all such seemingly conflicting verses within the overall revelatory context of the Qur'an. My study of these verses convinces me that the followers of Muhammad, as the bearers of the last revelation, possess a distinct advantage over other faith communities. They are tasked with leading the prophetic struggle until the end of time. Given this enormous responsibility of global leadership, policy-making must be carefully protected from external influences. Despite recognizing them as faith communities, the People of the Book should not be allowed into the inner circle or influence our policy decisions:

وَلَا يَتَّخِذِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۚ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ فَلَيْسَ مِنَ اللَّهِ فِي شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْ تَتَّقُوا مِنْهُمْ تُقَاتُوا ۚ وَاللَّهُ نَفْسَهُ ۖ إِلَى اللَّهِ الْمَصِيرُ [3:28]

However, this does not mean that we bear any grudge against them or consider their faith to be inferior:

لَيْسُوا سَوَاءً مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ أُمَّةٌ قَانِمَةٌ يَنْتُلُونَ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ أَنْاءَ اللَّيْلِ وَهُمْ يَسْجُدُونَ [3:113]

Having been assigned to world leadership, the Qur'an guides us on what to expect from other believing nations and how they can be helpful:

لَتَجِدَنَّ أَشَدَّ النَّاسِ عَدَاوَةً لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الْيَهُودَ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا وَلَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُمْ مَوَدَّةً لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصَارَىٰ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ مِنْهُمْ قِسِّيَّيْنَ وَرُهْبَانًا وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ [5:82]

But the Jews are not to be overlooked either:

وَمِنْ قَوْمٍ مُوسَىٰ أُمَّةٌ يَهْدُونَ بِالْحَقِّ وَبِهِ يَعْدِلُونَ [7:159]

Given such explicit Qur'anic guidance, there should be no doubt that the remnants of earlier prophetic communities hold significance for us. Utilizing the principle of "kalimatun sawa" (common word), we must establish productive relationships with them. Members of these faith communities should be assessed individually and based on their own merits, recognizing that among them are also individuals indifferent to divine guidance. Such disruptive elements should not be allowed to dictate the course of our collective efforts:

وَلَنْ تَرْضَىٰ عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا النَّصَارَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ ۖ قُلْ إِنَّ هُدَى اللَّهِ هُوَ الْهُدَىٰ ۚ وَلَئِنَّ ابْنَتِي ۖ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ بَعْدَ الَّذِي جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ [2:120]

Whether they are remnants of earlier prophetic traditions or the communitarian Muslims of today, what truly distinguishes individuals in the eyes of God is their faith (iman) and good deeds (amal saleh). No one is born a disbeliever (kafir). Like faith, disbelief (kufr) is a worldview that can captivate anyone, regardless of their nation or culture. The Qur'an refers to the disbelievers of Ahl al-Kitab who sought clear evidence to guide them back to faith. Transitioning from

the realm of faith to the realm of disbelief, and vice versa, represents a significant shift in one's worldview, a paradigm shift that is accessible to everyone at any time. When there is a genuine effort to rebuild the community of submitters, its call extends beyond Jews, Christians, or today's communitarian Muslims; it is an invitation open to submitters from all backgrounds.

When the trumpet is blown, all those who unite to extol the glory of God will be recognized as rightful members of the Ummah Muslimah. Historically, those who heeded this call and rallied around the Prophet originated from a variety of believing and non-believing backgrounds. Bilal from Ethiopia, Salman from Persia, Suhaib from Rome, the Muhajirun from Makkah, and the Ansar tribes from Yathrib all converged to embrace a new worldview that defined their identity: submission to the one Lord God. This intellectual and spiritual upheaval transformed the once remote village of Yathrib into al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, the City of Enlightenment. Similarly, if today's followers of Muhammad can rekindle the essence that initially defined them as Muslims, it's highly plausible they will find themselves amidst a new era of Enlightenment.

Notes and References

- ¹ When history is viewed through a linguistic lens by future generations, it becomes apparent that the Islamic community was fragmented into different sects. The contentious battles of Jamal and Siffin provoked a question about the whereabouts of truth, which, in turn, intensified a deeper, more fundamental inquiry: What makes a person a Muslim, and how does a Muslim differ from a believer? The Koranic verse, "The Bedouins say, 'We have believed.' Say, 'You have not [yet] believed; but say [instead], 'We have submitted,'..." (49:14), ignited a conversation about the essential distinction between Islam, or submission, and Iman, or faith. There exists a notable group among Shia Muslims who continue to perceive themselves as believers rather than merely Muslims. They propose that faith represents a progression beyond mere submission. As per a tradition cited by Kulayni in 'Al-Kafi', Imam Baqir encompasses submission within the concept of faith. For him, faith demands tangible affirmation through actions. And because for them, allegiance to the Imam, or Wilayat, is a cardinal pillar of their faith, a true believer, as per Baqir, must articulate their loyalty to the Imam. Absent this acknowledgment, the attainment of complete faith is considered implausible.

In another of Kulayni's accounts (Al-Kafi), Ja'far Sadiq defines faith as the total of inward acknowledgment and outward actions. When we examine this, it becomes clear that this definition is a linguistic attempt to rectify the detours taken in

our political history. By including actions as part of faith, it implies that those who have reached positions of power despite their lack of true faith should be removed. This in turn could help rejuvenate the collective faith-based life under a just Imam. Yet, while groups like the Kharijites, Qadarites, and Mu'tazilites did not view mere acknowledgment in the heart as sufficient for faith, a considerable number of Muslims - including esteemed scholars like Abu Hanifa - deemed this internal acknowledgment enough to fulfill faith. Both of these viewpoints were, fundamentally, outcomes of the linguistic interpretation of faith. One sought to overthrow the existing system, while the other felt that Islam could bear political deviations for the sake of preventing strife. Al-Baqir was staunchly against this 'Murji' perspective, going as far as to assert that the Murjiites had corrupted the divine tradition on both internal and external levels. He compared them to their community's 'Jews,' claiming they surpassed Christians and Jews in their antagonism towards Islam. For further reference, consult 'Al-Ghuluw wal-Firaq al-Ghaliyah fi al-Hadarat al-Islamiyah' by Abdullah Salim al-Samarrai, Baghdad, 1972, p. 262.

- ² Setting themselves against those swept up in the allure of Hellenistic culture, those steadfastly adhering to Judaism symbolically illustrated their reluctance to veer off course amidst fluctuating societal currents. Rather, they committed to preserving their ideological identity, persisting in their efforts irrespective of the prevailing conditions. Further exploration on this subject can be found in W.C. Smith's work, 'The Meaning and End of Religion', page 263.
- ³ In the context of Jewish theological reflection, "Israel" is not just a reference to a national or ethnic group. Rather, it symbolizes a collective of individuals who are seen by God as the covenant's beneficiaries. This group, bound to the sacred Covenant, exists for a significant objective and shouldn't be mistaken to denote a certain social, cultural, or racial identity.

Considering the Jews of Israel as mentioned in the New Testament, whose binding association with this divine Covenant has weakened, they cannot be the recipients of the prophecies that establish Israel's dominance and its virtues over the global nations, rooted in the viewpoint of Torah. This can be further elucidated through the Book of Amos (2:3), which states, "Out of all the families on the earth, I have exclusively chosen you. Thus, I will hold you accountable for all of your iniquities."

The puzzle of defining Jewish identity has long perplexed even the most erudite Jewish scholars. Attempts to measure devotion often amplify differences rather than create cohesion. The effort to develop a firmly rooted Judaism during the medieval era didn't yield a clear-cut result, but its dialogues did lay a solid foundation for future Jewish thought. The scholarly contributions of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), Yaakov ben Asher's *Tur* (1269–1369), and Joseph Karo's *Shulchan Arukh* (1488–1575), notwithstanding their immense legal and intellectual depth, fell short of providing a universally accepted definition of Judaism.

The formation of the State of Israel brought the question of Jewish identity to the fore. Who qualifies as a Jew and the assertion of Jewish identity as a basic right to citizenship became contentious issues. Amid these complexities, reaching a consensus on a firm definition of Judaism became an uphill task for the Jewish people. According to the Israeli Law of Return, anyone self-identifying as a Jew automatically becomes eligible for Israeli citizenship. This shift turned the definition of Judaism into a political necessity more than a religious query.

Interestingly, the vast jurisprudential deliberations over centuries proved inadequate in this context. The Jewish community found it more convenient to accept the definition prescribed by the Nazis in the Nuremberg laws. According to these laws, a Jew is someone with Jewish parents, married to a Jew, or Jewish through their grandparents. The simplicity of the Nuremberg laws resolved a question that had eluded resolution

despite centuries of intellectual wrestling and Jewish legal discourse.

- ⁴ Many intellectuals concur that the labels 'Christian' or 'Nazarene' were first attached to the followers of Jesus as a term of derision, likely by those who opposed them. Originally, these followers saw themselves as part of a reformatory group within the larger Jewish community. The New Testament itself supports this idea, indicating that the term 'Christian' was first used in a sarcastic manner by opponents in the city of Antioch (Acts, 11:26). The term was later used by King Agrippa, who said to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

However, once this term became widespread, leaders within the Christian community did not object to its use. As cited from Peter, "Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1 Peter 4:16). For further understanding on this topic, one may consult 'The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church' edited by F.L. Gross and 'Nazarene Jewish Christianity: from the End of the New Testament period until its disappearance in the Fourth Century' written by Ray A. Pritz.

- ⁵ After St. Ignatius was martyred, the title 'Christian' began to carry a sense of pride, symbolizing a commitment to Christ's teachings. St. Ignatius was a passionate advocate of this path, viewing the dedication to Christ as the ultimate goal of discipleship. His martyrdom marked a shift in the perception of the Christian identity. What was once a derogatory term coined by opponents became a respected term, embodying honour and pride.
- ⁶ The Quran pays homage to the monotheists from the pages of history, putting them forward as models for current believers. One such example is the narrative of the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription, told with a sense of deep reverence and awe. In every era, those who've affirmed, "Our Lord is

Allah," and steadfastly maintained their faith, have received a divine backing. God's intervention was evident in the story of the Companions of the Cave. He not only protected them in all aspects and bolstered their faith through his unseen support but also turned their story into a beacon of inspiration for the faithful throughout ages. The core message of this story emphasizes that those who bravely choose to uphold pure monotheism, regardless of societal backlash, are worthy recipients of God's focus and favour.

Instead of using the tale of the Companions of the Cave as a wellspring for faith's renewal and spiritual inspiration, believers got ensnared in historical minutiae. Questions arose around the identity of these divinely blessed individuals, their temporal existence, and their affiliation with a specific prophetic lineage. This line of questioning sparked prolonged debates. The numerical disagreement about the Companions of the Cave - whether they were three with their dog being the fourth, five with their dog the sixth, or seven with the dog as the eighth - drew in scholars and thinkers. These intellectual circles, rather than gleaning wisdom from the narrative, found themselves tangled up in the ensuing argumentative maze.

This divergence in perspectives led to the formation of distinct sects among believers, each defined by its interpretation of the Companions' numbers. Some Christian sects, such as the Jacobites, argued there were three Companions, whereas the Nestorians suggested there were five, with their dog as the sixth. By labelling these interpretations as 'guesswork about the unseen,' the Quran clarified that such speculation does not originate from divine revelation, hence deeming a decisive statement unnecessary.

Despite the Quran's explicit caution against indulging in speculative tales, it is intriguing that our scholars and interpreters have been so absorbed in this realm of conjecture. They've ventured to such lengths that they have concocted names for these Companions of the Cave, recording and

preserving them as protective amulets, attributing to them a power to avert misfortune. Regrettably, instead of inspiring Muslims to emulate the path of these Companions, these speculated names have become talismans used recurrently by well-meaning Muslims as shields against life's adversities.

In his work, "Al-Rahmah fi al-Tibb wa al-Hikmah," Al-Suyuti professed that these names have been tested and found potent against malevolent spirits and jinns. Similarly, the biography "Tazkirat al-Rashid" of Rashid Ahmad Gangohi corroborates the notion that the names of the Companions of the Cave and their dog might serve as a lifeline for believers in times of distress. Al-Suyuti's listing includes: Tamlikha, Kamishliya, Marnush, Haybuna, Sarbunus, Akhfishdakhatus, and Dawunas, with the dog's name being either Qitmir or Qitmur.

- 7 The Prophet Muhammad did not lay the foundation for a new community, nor did he designate his followers as a novel sect. The manner of invitation found in the Quran consistently clarifies that Muhammad's mission was not to initiate a fresh community but to rekindle the same family of the faithful, the remnants of which are scattered across this land in diverse forms. Their intellectual and ideological legacy has now diminished to the point where they solely assert their ethnic or religious ties to the prophets of the past, deeming it sufficient for their redemption.

In response to the call, "Be Jews or Christians", the Quran counters with, "No, follow the faith of Abraham, a model of pure faith" (Al-Baqarah:135). This signifies the broad, encompassing nature of the Prophet Muhammad's message. He wasn't forming a new community, but revitalizing the original Abrahamic community. His call was a culmination of the teachings of all previous prophets: "Indeed, my Lord has guided me to a straight path - a correct religion - the way of Abraham, the model of pure faith" (Al-An'am:161).

The Quran repeatedly emphasizes that what has been given to the followers of Muhammad isn't a new doctrine but the same faith brought by previous prophets: "He has ordained for you of religion what He enjoined upon Noah and that which We have revealed to you" (Ash-Shura:13).

Those who believed in the previous prophets were continually reminded that Muhammad is the guardian of the Abrahamic faith in his time: "Indeed, the most worthy of Abraham among the people are those who followed him and this Prophet, and those who believe" (Al-Imran:68). For those who have come to believe in Muhammad, they should realize that they are pledged to the same faith that has been explained to them in the Torah and the Gospel: "Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet, whom they find written in what they have of the Torah and the Gospel" (Al-A'raf:157). The role of Muhammad, as the final Prophet and the trustee of the heritage of all previous prophets, was to complete their mission successfully. This naturally implies that his message was not confined to a specific race, group, or geographic region. His teachings were designed to uplift all of humanity. As an international prophet, upon whom future history depends, it would be unreasonable to expect him to establish a separate community solely focused on its prosperity.

This is why we don't hear the term 'Ummah Muhammadia' in the early days of Islamic history. Neither Muhammad nor any other prophet in the world attempted to form a community based on their person. A prophet's mission is not to fragment humanity or propagate a personality cult, but to guide people towards God. It would be inconceivable for a person who is honoured by God with scripture and wisdom to incite people to worship him: "Be worshippers of me" (Al-Imran:79). Like all prophets, Muhammad's call is embodied in "Be Rabbaniyyun", a call to which all prophets, including Abraham, Ismail, Ishaq, Yaqub, Moses, Jesus, and their progenies, have testified.

When the call to "Be Rabbaniyyun" strays from its core and evolves into a form of sectarianism, or when reverence for prophets and their followers become more personality cult than faith, a process commences. This process is what we term the negation of religion in the name of religion, also known as denominationalism or ritualistic worship. Under such circumstances, religion evolves into an identity, rather than an act of devotion.

Communities begin to see their illustrious history and connection to their prophets as a guarantee for salvation. Examples of this can be found throughout the Quran in references to the self-righteousness of Jews and Christians, who often view their Jewish or Christian identity as sufficient for salvation. However, the lineage connection to prophets could not guarantee salvation for Muslims of that time, similar to people of Jewish and Christian faiths, and it couldn't be claimed that Abraham, Ismail, Ishaq, Yaqub were Jewish or Christian. In the same vein, one should not believe that a mere Mohammedan identity could guarantee salvation for Muslims.

The debate over salvation based on identity was eventually resolved with the understanding that God values actions above all else: "For us are our deeds, and for you are your deeds. We are sincere in faith" (Al-Baqarah:139).

Against all these unavailing identities, the group that formed under the leadership of the new prophet as 'Rabbaniyyun' is encouraged to transcend sectarianism and select a divine identity: "The colour of Allah, and who is better than Allah at colouring?" (Al-Baqarah:138).

Should a new Mohammedan identity emerge to rival Jewish or Christian identities, it would not befit the role of a universal Rabbani prophet. This prophet, while demanding faith in all preceding prophets and their scriptures, sees the forebears and their legacies as natural allies.

- ⁸ For those who habitually perceive the Holy Quran merely as a divine revelation bestowed upon the Muslim nation, it's quite instinctive to envision Islam through a narrow, sectarian lens. Nevertheless, the Quran makes it unequivocally evident that the book we currently hold isn't the charter of some fresh faith. On the contrary, it is the proclamation of that unchanging religion, Islam, which has, throughout various epochs of history, reached diverse nations via diverse prophets and messengers. Such affirmation is found in verses like, "Indeed, this is in the earlier scriptures, the scriptures of Abraham and Moses" (Al-A'la 19-18), or at another place, "Indeed, it is in the scriptures of the ancients" (Ash-Shura 194). These declarations elucidate that the Quran's version of divine revelation, which has reached the seekers of truth today, is the embodiment of that same pristine faith, Islam. This is the faith that represents the ratified path of total submission, a path faithfully trodden by all truth seekers and their prophets and messengers.

The acknowledgment and remembrance of Prophets, familiar to the Arabs or deemed necessary by the Quran, form a vital component of the faith. Yet, this doesn't imply that non-Arab nations and their associated Prophets, absent from the Quran's pages, are excluded from this holy lineage. Indeed, the Quran asserts the universality of divine guidance: every nation had its messenger, every people their guide. No human society, whether Arab or Canaanite, was privileged or overlooked in the distribution of this divine enlightenment. The Quran's focus on the narratives of Arab Prophets or Semitic tribes isn't indicative of favouritism, rather, it's an attempt to resonate with its initial audience through the use of relatable history and familiar environments. The divine mission of Prophets and messengers pervades all corners of the world, throughout every era of human history. This is reinforced by the Quran: there are messengers whose stories we have narrated and those we haven't, and every messenger was sent speaking the language of his people.

- ⁹ The tendency of treating Prophet Muhammad's message as a form of ethnic identity rather than a conceptual call has led the Muslim community into the same pitfalls that had once ensnared the Jewish people. There's a prevalent belief that, on Judgment Day, God will specially favour Muhammad's followers. This viewpoint is underscored by traditions attributing a unique intercession role to Prophet Muhammad and awarding him the Banner of Praise.

Such traditions quickly gained ground. Reports proliferate claiming that Muhammad's community will be the largest on the Day of Judgment, reinforcing the confidence of Muslims. Further tradition attributes to the Prophet advice for men to marry loving and child-bearing women, for he claimed to take pride in their large numbers among other nations.

A particular tradition from Abbas reports that the Prophet prayed for his community's forgiveness on the evening of Arafah. God reportedly responded that He had granted forgiveness, except for transgressions against fellow beings. The Prophet then entreated, "O God, if You wish, You could pardon the transgressor at the expense of the wronged person's good deeds". However, this plea was not accepted that evening. The next morning, at Muzdalifah, he repeated his supplication, and this time it was accepted, making the Prophet laugh. When queried by Abu Bakr and Umar, he explained his laughter was triggered by the sight of the devil distressingly throwing dust on his head, because God had accepted his prayer for his community's forgiveness.

According to another account, shared by Abdullah bin Amr bin Al-Aas, Prophet Muhammad is said to have read aloud the prayers offered by Abraham and Jesus in the Quran, prayers that they had fervently uttered for their respective communities. In an emotion-laden voice, the Prophet implored, "Oh, Allah, my Ummah, my Ummah!" Upon hearing this plea, Allah instructed Gabriel to discern the cause behind Prophet's profound distress. Upon understanding, Allah gave Prophet Muhammad an

assurance, promising that He will certainly provide contentment regarding the concerns for his Ummah, and that he shall not face disappointment.

- ¹⁰ In the earliest stages, followers of Muhammad emerged as an ideological group in the world. They were torchbearers of a grand mission. Despite their similar clothing, eating habits, and appearances to other local Arabs, their worldview was utterly unique. They identified themselves not as the Ummah of Muhammad, but rather as the Muslim Ummah, part of a broader, more universal community of faith.

During the early days of Islam, Muhammad's followers stepped onto the world stage as a philosophical community. They were the torchbearers of a profound mission. In their daily lives—eating, drinking, dressing, and their general conduct—they were virtually indistinguishable from their local Arab compatriots. But, their understanding of the cosmos was entirely distinct. They perceived themselves as the Muslim community rather than merely followers of Muhammad.

As time progressed, however, Muslim identity shifted from representing philosophical ideals to symbolizing a national identity. A sequence of cultural shifts began to differentiate Muslims from other nations. The situation escalated to the point where resistance from Jews, Christians, and other societies was labelled as an attack on the faith itself. This climate gave rise to an increase in the circulation of traditions that distinguished Muslims from other nations not in terms of their worldview but their appearance and behaviours. This shift rendered certain aspects important, which had no correlation with inner transformation, obedience to God and the Prophet, and were a product of particular social contexts.

For instance, a tradition associated with Abu Hurairah, mentioned in Sahihayn, emphasizes that "Jews and Christians do not dye their hair; so do the opposite." As time went on, scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah formulated comprehensive religious

concepts based on these traditions. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, the instruction to "do the opposite" in the tradition signifies that opposing the customs of Jews and Christians is, in fact, a core objective of Sharia law. Tirmidhi reported a similar tradition from Abu Hurairah, where it's attributed that the Prophet commanded to dye gray hair and not resemble Jews. Nasa'i presented similar accounts from Ibn Zubair and Ibn Umar. Yet, in these same collections of tradition, it is clearly stated that this Hadith is considered sound and authentic, according to Tirmidhi. Conversely, Nasa'i and Dar Qutni did not rank this tradition as highly significant.

In revered texts such as Sahih Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, we find instances of teaching that urged believers to mark their faith visibly by shaping their facial hair in a way that differentiated them from the polytheists. The edicts went so far as to instruct Muslims to trim their mustaches and grow their beards to contrast with the practices of Zoroastrians. As time passed, the emphasis on separating oneself from non-Muslims grew so pronounced that the very act of contrasting with non-Muslim practices became a defining feature of Islamic identity. At times, this devotion to opposition assumed a somewhat farcical character. An anecdote speaks of Imam Ahmad's reaction to being asked about shaving or trimming the front or back of the head. He replied that this act belonged to the Magians, and anyone imitating them would be considered one of them.

Certain instructions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad insisted on opposing Jewish practices, such as their custom of not praying while wearing shoes or leather socks. One hadith from Abu Huraira, preserved in Abu Dawood, suggested that Islam would prevail as long as Muslims broke their fast quickly, contrasting with the delay observed by Jews and Christians. However, these narrations about avoiding imitation are, from a technical standpoint, far from reliable. The very scholars who transmitted these accounts have themselves admitted to their unreliability. An example is the narration, attributed to Qatadah,

that the act of shaving the 'Qafaa' (back of the head) was a Magian practice. It's striking that, despite acknowledging the weak foundation of these narrations, scholars have freely used them to craft a particular version of Islam—one characterized by outward markers of differentiation rather than shared spiritual principles.

- ¹¹ As the centuries rolled on, the expansive nature of Islamic identity, one that transcended national boundaries and cultural practices, began to wane. It was slowly replaced by a localized identity, where being Muslim became conflated with the adoption of distinct lifestyles, attire, and societal norms prevalent amongst Muslims. This downward spiral continued until the era of the influential Islamic scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah. Regrettably, by this time, Arabic language and culture had been erroneously deemed as the very essence of Islam. Surprisingly, scholars of Ibn Taymiyyah's stature even insinuated that learning the Persian language could potentially breed hypocrisy amongst the faithful. Such views obfuscated the reality that neither language nor culture is a breeding ground for hypocrisy or disbelief. Instead, these negative traits stem from the deterioration of the inner self and one's perception of the world. It is important to remember that the hypocrites during the Prophet's time were steeped in Arab culture, not influenced by Persian or any other foreign culture. In the Indian subcontinent, we witness similar distortions of Islamic identity. Figures like Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi and Shah Waliullah laid an inordinate emphasis on Arab culture, trying to present it as the quintessence of Islam. This, unfortunately, was a manifestation of the same confusion that blurred the lines between a universally applicable Islamic identity and a narrow, nationalistic Muslim identity.

The conflation of Arab national identity with Islam resulted in a significant issue. What was initially a global religion was now perceived narrowly through an ethnic lens. Those who viewed this international faith from the perspective of Arab nationalism

weren't adequately equipped to bear the intellectual responsibility of global leadership. This resulted in Muslims, despite their cultural sophistication and military might, entering a path of intellectual and ideological decline. When this decline became apparent to all, intellectuals misjudged its causes. They mistakenly attributed the rise of Islam to the very nationalist interpretation that had led to their downfall. Ibn Taymiyyah proposed that the Muslim rulers, who imitated the practices of Jews, Christians, Romans, and Persians, strayed from the tenets of Islam and abandoned the path outlined by God and His Prophet. This deviation led to their downfall at the hands of the non-believing Turks. To paraphrase Ibn Taymiyyah, "This tendency to emulate the religious and cultural practices of Jews, Christians, Romans, and Persians led to a deviation from Islamic principles. This deviation, which was in opposition to the teachings of Islam and included actions that were disliked by Allah and His Prophet, led to the rise of the infidel Turks. These Turks, who had been forewarned about their actions, exerted an influence on the Muslims that had never been seen in the history of Islam." (*Iqtidaa' al-Siraat al-Mustaqeem*, comments by Naser bin Abdulkarim Al-Aql, page 299).

Scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah regard Arabism as an inseparable component of Islam, suggesting that without it, the essence of Muhammad's message is jeopardized. At times, it becomes a complex task to discern the delineation between the constructs of Arab culture and the decrees of Allah and His Prophet. Take for example the subject of the Arabic language. According to Ibn Taymiyyah, one's faith cannot be deemed fully authentic or substantial without comprehending this language. He maintains, "It's important to realize that regular use of a language noticeably impacts one's intellect, personality, and faith. It also contributes to aligning the present community with the practices of the early Companions and their successors, enhancing intellectual and religious characteristics in the process. Moreover, the Arabic language itself embodies a part of

the faith, and learning it is considered an obligatory duty, given that understanding the Quran and Sunnah is incumbent upon believers..." (Iqtidaa' al-Siraat al-Mustaqeem, page 449).

Language serves as a conduit for expression. It's explicitly mentioned in the Holy Quran that Allah sent prophets to all nations across various epochs, employing distinct languages. The Scrolls of Abraham, the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran each use different tongues. Thus, when Allah chose these different languages at different times for His revelations, there's no rationale for denigrating any of these languages or their influenced cultures. However, what has practically transpired is that the attempts to establish the dominance of the Arabic language have given birth to a sense of degradation towards other languages and cultures. For instance, Imam Ahmad reportedly found non-Arabic names of months and individuals objectionable. Other jurists such as Qadi Abu Ya'la Ibn Aqeel and Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani considered adopting non-Arabic attire to be improper. Abdul Qadir Jilani's viewpoint was that one should reject anything that counters Arab culture and resembles non-Arabic cultures. Imam Shafi'i was notably disturbed by the use of the non-Arabic term "Samasara," an alternative word for a trader. He argued that Arabic-speaking people shouldn't have to hear this word as Arabic was Allah's preferred language. This disdainful stance towards non-Arabic cultures quickly fostered a sense of intellectual discord. Imam Ahmad, when questioned about Sindhi shoes, expressed his dislike for them, but conceded their use for ablution and use in the restroom. Sindhi or Indian shoes were perceived as inferior, not due to their craftsmanship, but solely due to cultural bias. Sa'eed bin 'Amr, as noted by Ibn Taymiyyah, even proposed that if these shoes were found in the Prophet's Mosque, they should be expelled from Medina.

Keep in mind, Sa'eed bin 'Amr is presented by Ibn Taymiyyah as a religious leader among the people of Basra. Ibn Sirin relayed that Huzaifah ibn al-Yaman wouldn't enter a home where he saw

copper or brass utensils, claiming that imitating a nation is tantamount to joining that nation.

The tradition of imitation, especially a narration attributed to Ibn Umar in Abu Dawud, stating "He who mimics a people is one of them," plays a crucial role. This tradition significantly contributes to framing Islam in an Arab context. From a technical perspective, Ibn Taymiyyah acknowledges this hadith has a reliable chain of narration. Yet, he has accepted it as an absolute truth, mainly because it aligns with his own inclinations.

Ibn Taymiyyah also affirms the notion that the Arab race is superior to the non-Arab race, considering it as a core belief of Sunni Islam. In support of this race-centric belief, he quotes an alleged hadith: "Love for Arabs is a sign of faith, and hatred for them is hypocrisy." The phrasing and tone of this saying suggest it likely emerged during a time when non-Arab influences gained ascendancy in Abbasid Baghdad. During that period, specific narrations of this nature were introduced to mitigate the influence of non-Arab officials and the scholarly circles of the People of the Book in governmental affairs.

The conflation of Islam with an Arab template brought about a notable disadvantage. The Islamic Ummah, fundamentally intended to be a unit transcending barrier of Arab or non-Arab, black or white, was instead broken into diverse societal factions. Islamic legal scholars explicitly asserted that Arab and non-Arab faithful could not be viewed as equals in societal terms. For example, Abu Hanifa acknowledged a person with both parental lineages as Arab and considered them apt for matrimony with 'pure' Arabs. In the perspective of Abu Yusuf, a person with a single line of Arab descent was seen fit for marriage alliances within Arab circles.

¹² Ibn Hisham, *The Life of the Prophet*, edited by F. Wüstenfeld, two volumes, Göttingen, 1858-1860, p. 685.

- ¹³ Ibn Aqil's "Al-Wadih fi Usul al-Fiqh", a text about the principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, published in Beirut in 1996. The relevant information can be found in Volume 1, page 20.
- ¹⁴ For more examples and details of such disagreements, refer to Al-Damashqi Al-Shafi'i's "Rahmat al-Ummah fi Ikhtilaf al-A'imah", published in Cairo in 1997. Also see Ibn Rushd's "Bidaya al-Mujtahid wa Nihaya al-Muqtasid", published in Cairo in 1996. Furthermore, Al-Jaziri's "Al-Fiqh 'ala Mazahib al-Arb'ah" provides additional insights.
- ¹⁵ The case of Riad Soleh is well known to all, both the common public and those more informed. Soleh, who was the Prime Minister of Lebanon at the time of its independence in 1943, is said to have converted to Shi'ism on paper merely because he had no male offspring, only five daughters. For more details, please refer to the following link: <http://al-filfilan.blogspot.com/2010/01/when-sunni-become-shia-for-womens.html>
- ¹⁶ Certain scholars, interpreting the phrase "{We only worship Allah}", have put forth the notion that any form of collaboration with the People of the Book - that is, Christians and Jews - can't be entertained until they embrace an unadulterated belief in one God. Nevertheless, their identification as the People of the Book is in itself an indication that they hold a somewhat divergent view in contrast to Muslims. If that were not the case, then what else would set them apart from Muslims? The Quran does not use the term "People of the Book" for those who once belonged to the Jewish or Christian communities but accepted the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and became a part of his followers. In reality, these individuals were those who were in some way hesitant to let go of their previous religious affiliations. The proclamation of the term "except" expresses the belief that they are deemed worthy of collaboration despite all their divergences in thought and practice.

Much like numerous Muslim scholars, certain Christian theologians have consistently opined that the Muslim concept of "except" (pertaining to the affirmation that there is no god except Allah) can't serve as a foundation for interfaith interaction. They argue that the Muslims' interpretation of monotheism is significantly different from their own. Drawing on C.S. Lewis's words, "Christ professed to be divine. Logically, this gives rise to three potential scenarios. Either he was truthful in his proclamation, or he was affected by a mental aberration, or he was entangled in an intentional error that verges on sacrilege. Those close to him, even his adversaries, attest that Jesus wasn't malevolent but was virtuous and good. He was admired as a profound teacher whose insightful words enchanted people. Surely, he wasn't inflicted with any mental illness, reinforcing the conviction that Jesus was indeed who he professed to be."

In our perspective, the term "except" represents a shared platform for dialogue and partnership, despite contrasting understandings of monotheism. If, on the other hand, both parties insist on prerequisites necessitating the renouncement of their respective stances, there's a risk of losing sight of the broader goal of collective conciliation. This phenomenon has been evident in previous interfaith exchanges, with recent responses to the "except" charter from Oman serving as an illustrative case. Please see: An Open Letter, A response to the letter and call entitled "A common word between Us and You" from 138 Muslim Religious Leaders addressed to Christian Leaders worldwide, The Maranatha Community, April 2008, Manchester, United Kingdom.

¹⁷ In the annals of history and narratives, it's widely believed that the majority of the People of the Book, predominantly Jews, showed reluctance in embracing the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. The accounts of conflicts with various Jewish tribes in Medina, which have been downplayed in the Abbasid historical narration due to sociopolitical influences, paint a picture of a missed golden opportunity by the communities of

previous prophets. Such a notion finds reinforcement in the prophetic traditions, one of which quotes Prophet Muhammad as saying, "If ten Jews believed in me, all the Jews would believe" (Bukhari).

Contrary to this, the Quran and various historical evidences affirm that a considerable proportion of the People of the Book did heed his call. The Quran explicitly states, "And indeed, there are among the People of the Book, those who believe in Allah and in that which has been revealed to you, and in that which has been revealed to them" (3:199). It's well documented that a significant number of Christians from Abyssinia accepted Islam, having been in the service of the Prophet. Also, we are aware of the instance where forty Jewish scholars converted to Islam under the guidance of Naeem al-Habari.

- 18 Islam is not simply about verbal proclamations of faith. Its sacred text, the Quran, often couples faith with good deeds, underscoring the notion that authentic belief is constantly ratified through action. Hypocrites, conversely, consistently repudiate their spoken faith by their deeds. Consequently, a faith devoid of the vigour of action is deemed unworthy. The Muslims of the early period, familiar with this joy of faith, felt they were entrusted with a pivotal role in the cosmos. They understood that any work to be completed in the world, extending until the final hour, was their charge as followers of Muhammad. Then, the notion of 'righteous action' was an umbrella term covering all tasks connected with the advancement and betterment of humanity.

The Quran bestowed upon Muhammad the title of mercy for all humanity, not just Muslims. So, it stands to reason that the virtuous actions of his followers should be of benefit to the broader human society. Their constructive deeds should, logically, contribute to enriching the human experience as a whole.

Upon analysing various verses from the Quran, it becomes apparent that the notion of 'righteous deeds' goes beyond personal religious rituals like prayer, fasting, or almsgiving. This is illustrated in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:277): "Those who believe, do good deeds, establish prayer and give charity will have their reward from their Lord." So, what exactly does the Quran demand from the faithful when it refers to 'righteous deeds', separately from prayer and charity? Why are these believers promised a reward with their Lord? The Quran provides, in different ways, the promise of Paradise to those believers who embody 'righteous deeds', as mentioned in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:82): "Those who believe and do good deeds are the dwellers of Paradise." Even more profoundly, the Quran applauds those of other faiths – Jews, Christians, Sabians – who perform 'righteous deeds'. God-conscious individuals contemplating life after death are assured of their reward with their Lord and promised relief from all forms of fear and sorrow. Therefore, irrespective of the faith community they identify with, if believers tread on the path of righteous action, they are destined for success in this world and the hereafter. Through this general principle presented in the Quran, if we, as a Muslim community, assess ourselves objectively, understanding why we are currently deprived of the Quranic promise of dominance becomes less daunting.

In the lexicon of the Quran, 'righteous deeds' extend to all actions in tune with God's universal law and those benefiting humanity as a whole. This encompasses everything from removing obstacles from public paths for the convenience of all, to providing equal access to God's blessings, and promoting enlightenment and humility among humans. All these activities constitute 'righteous deeds'. While a believer is continuously involved in the betterment and beautification of society through constructive actions, a non-believer, due to their adverse approach, persistently causes harm to the worldly order. Nevertheless, even these non-believers, upon repentance and

choosing the path of faith and righteousness, become just as entitled to promises of success. In the Quran, 'righteous deeds' are often contrasted with disbelief. For instance, in Surah Ar-Rum (30:44), it says: "Whoever disbelieves will suffer from his disbelief, and whoever does righteously, they prepare (good) for their own souls." This suggests that those not adopting a constructive attitude, who refrain from contributing their share of 'righteous deeds' to humanity, and who can't see beyond personal or national interests, are dangerously verging on disbelief due to their negative disposition. When the spring of creative abilities dries up, it's a signal that we're moving away from 'righteous deeds'. Such societies lose their eligibility for global leadership. They become trapped in a state of imitation, perceiving their survival only in replicating other nations, as was the fate of the chosen nation of Jews, quoted in the Quran as "Be apes, despised and hated." (Al-Baqarah, 2:65).

- 19 Abu Rehan Al-Beruni, renowned as a scholar, isn't the first to consider Hindus as part of the "People of the Book". But he's unique in the methodical approach he took to studying Hindu religious texts, learning from Hindu scholars directly. This study led him to the conclusion that, like other ancient civilizations, Hindus once held monotheistic beliefs. He quoted the philosopher Mani Patanjali to support his view, stating, "A new consciousness is achieved through deep reflection on the unity of God. A seeker of God wishes wellness for all beings, and through this profound contemplation, achieves wisdom, and ultimately, eternal salvation."

Al-Beruni's assertion, which was based on his study of Hindu religious texts, argued convincingly for the inclusion of Hindus among the People of the Book. This could explain why, during his conquests of Sindh and Multan, Muhammad Bin Qasim treated Hindu temples similarly to Jewish and Christian places of worship in Iraq and Syria. There were no objections raised to this treatment, as documented by Abul Hassan Bin Muhammad Al Madaini in the historical chronicle Chachnama.

Further support comes from Qazi Sa'id Andalusí, a 5th-century Hijri writer, who classified Hindus as Sabians in his work *Tabaqat al-Umam*. Shahrastani, in his book *Al-Milal Wal-Nihal*, portrayed Brahmins as followers of the Abrahamic faith. Although some worship in temples and others believe in idolatry, Shahrastani describes these people as dualists, akin to the Magi who refer to the devil as Ahriman and God Almighty as Yazdan.

Fakhruddin Razi, in his interpretation of Surah Hud, notes his observations from travels in India, specifically that non-believers there agreed on the existence of God Almighty. Later scholar, Qazi Sanaullah Panipati (died 1810 AD), explicitly stated in his interpretation of Ayat Jizya that Hindus in India merit being called People of the Book: "Let's consider this: if the Zoroastrians' ancient lineage and recognition as 'People of the Book' is enough to classify modern-day Zoroastrians as such, then shouldn't we extend the same classification to the Hindus of our era, even with their idolatry? They possess a scripture—the Vedas—which they hold to be divine, divided into four sections. A significant portion of their foundational principles aligns with those found in our Shariah. Any differences might be seen as the unfortunate outcome of Satan's corruptive influence—an influence which has also led to the splintering of the Muslim community into many sects. Moreover, the Quran itself gives support to this line of thinking when it says, 'And there is not a nation but a warner has passed among them.' This verse implies that every community has been visited by a prophet at some point. With this consideration, it seems more appropriate, perhaps, to recognize Hindus as 'People of the Book' even more than the Zoroastrians." (Tafsir Mazhari, Vol. 5, p.240)

Abul Kalam Azad offers another interesting point of view on this. He questions, "Given that Hindus in India adhere to a specific set of religious guidelines, are custodians of knowledge and civilization, and lay claim to sacred scriptures, wouldn't it be

appropriate to consider them akin to the 'People of the Book'? They demonstrate a strong commitment to worship and a propensity to visualize natural phenomena. So why shouldn't they be seen as such?" (Reference: Jame-ul-Shawahid, pp. 53-55, Delhi)

From the early centuries, Muslim scholars have treated Hindus akin to the 'People of the Book', a term used in Islam to denote followers of non-Muslim religions that have a book of prayer, such as Jews and Christians. Some displayed caution towards the practices of Hindus, such as their method of animal slaughter and the prohibition of marriage to their women, as illustrated by Syed Sulaiman Nadvi in his 'Life of the Prophet' (Seerat-ul-Nabi, Vol 4, p.601). However, it's important to note that this caution is a more recent development. In earlier times, interactions between Muslims and Hindus were not so restricted. For example, when Abdullah Ashtar, the grandson of Hazrat Nafs Zakiya, sought refuge in Sindh, the king of Debal not only provided him asylum but also married his daughter to him. This suggests that prior to the intertwining of Islamic jurisprudence and politics in India, the mindset towards Hindus was far more open. In fact, until Arabic was established as the primary religious language, there was no significant confusion or narrow-mindedness regarding Hindu religions, despite cultural and linguistic differences. However, the emphasis on Arabic that grew in response to Akbar's Din-e-Ilahi did lead to a sort of cultural reservation. Whenever attempts were made to bridge the gap of language and culture, there emerged a sense that the sacred texts of Hindus were also part of the holy scriptures mentioned in the Quran. Anyone studying the Gayatri Mantra and Surah Fatiha side by side might feel this connection. Similarly, when Quranic verses are translated into a familiar Hindi vernacular, Hindus can perceive this as a new form of their ancient sacred texts. Fazlur Rahman Ganj Muradabadi (died 1895) demonstrated this idea by translating several Surahs of the Quran into a Hindi context. His translations suggest that,

if we can break through the cultural and linguistic mould of Arabic, we might establish a shared theoretical basis of thought and action between the followers of Muhammad and the Hindus, who are like the 'People of the Book'. Therefore, like other 'People of the Book', Hindus could also be seen as deserving of the invitation to the Word of Unity.

- ²⁰ Shafi'i, *The Book of Al-Umm*, edited by Mahmoud Matraji, Beirut 1992, Vol 4, p. 389 and Vol 2, p. 1217.

San'ani (Abdul Razzaq bin Hammam), *The Author*, edited by Habib Rahman Al-Azmi, Beirut, 1970-72, Vol 7, pp. 176-179. Ibn Qudamah (Abdullah bin Ahmed bin Mohammed), *The Sufficient*, Cairo, Hijri 1367, Vol 6, p. 589.

- ²¹ Ibn Hazm, *Muḥallī*, edited by Mohammed Khalil Haras, Cairo, 1964, Vol 7, p. 365.

- ²² *Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah*, Riyadh, 1409 AH, Vol 4, p. 106.

- ²³ Located in the shadow of Mount Sinai, the St. Catherine's Monastery stands as potentially the oldest continuing institution of Greek Orthodox Christianity in the world. History tells us a fascinating tale from the era of Prophet Muhammad; a group of Christian monks journeyed from this very monastery to meet him. This meeting concluded with the Prophet presenting them with a charter of rights, known as an *ahtiname*. The document guaranteed non-interference in their religious practices and assured the protection of their lives, wealth, churches, and honour under the custodianship of Muslims. A particularly interesting clause necessitated that a Muslim man, desiring to wed a Christian woman from their community, must first obtain her consent. Furthermore, she would retain the freedom to attend church, even post marriage. The responsibility of upholding this *ahtiname* was imparted upon the Muslim community, a duty to be adhered to perpetually.

The Sinai monastery, due to the protective covenant, was able to operate securely and without interference during the time of

Muslim rule. Its endowments were also spared from taxation. Sultan Selim I of the Ottoman Empire, in the early part of the sixteenth century, transferred the original covenant to Constantinople for preservation. Despite this, he ensured certified replicas remained at the monastery, which continue to attract visitors' interest today.

- ²⁴ Tabari, 'Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ayat al-Qur'an', Cairo 1954, Vol 2, p. 377. For more, see Ibn Kathir, 'Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim', Beirut 1970, Vol 1, p. 456, under verse Baqarah 221.
- ²⁵ Tabari, 'Jami' al-bayan', Vol 2, pp. 376-389. Jassas (Abu Bakr Ahmad bin Ali al-Razi), 'Ahkam al-Qur'an', Cairo. 1347H, Vol 2, p. 397.
- ²⁶ Sahih Bukhari, Book of Divorce.
- ²⁷ Sarakhsi (Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Abi Sahl), Al-Mabsut, Cairo 1324-1331H, Vol. 4, p. 210. Also see: Nahas (Abu Ja'far Ahmad bin Muhammad bin Ismail) Al-Nasikh wal-Mansukh fi Kitab Allah Ta'ala wa Ikhtilaf al-Ulama' fi Dhalk, Beirut 1991, Vol. 1, p. 52, Vol. 2, p. 5-6.
- ²⁸ Ibn Abi Shaybah (Abdul Rahman bin Muhammad bin Abi Shaybah Ibrahim bin Uthman Abu Bakr al-Kufi al-Abi), Kitab al-Musannaf fi al-Ahadith wal Athar, Vol. 4, p. 149.
- ²⁹ Shafi'i, Kitab ul-Umm, Beirut, 1993, Vol. 5, p. 10.
- ³⁰ Malik says: "I disapprove of marriage to women of the Dhimmi community, Jews and Christians. This isn't because it's forbidden, but because she might consume pork and alcohol, and there's a chance he might share these with her. Moreover, if they have children, she could influence them towards her faith and feed them forbidden foods or alcohol." This is from Sahnoon Al-Maliki's 'Mudawwana', reference mentioned, volume 2, page 306.
- ³¹ Ibn Taymiyyah provides a detailed narration as follows: "Narrated by Abu Bakr Al-Bazzaz; Ibrahim bin Saeed Al-Johari reported; Abu Ahmad reported; Abd Al-Jabbar bin Abbas

reported - a man from the people of Kufa who leaned towards Shi'ism, but his Hadiths are sound and straight. He said...and God knows best...this is the speech of Al-Bazzaz; from Ishaq from Aws bin Damaj who said: Salman (a companion of the Prophet) said 'We prefer you, O Arab people, due to the preference of the Messenger of God ﷺ for you. We do not marry your women, nor do we lead you in prayer.' (Iqtida, reference mentioned, pages 74, 373. See also: Al-Bayhaqi (Abu Bakr Ahmad bin Al-Hussein bin Ali), Al-Sunan Al-Kubra, Hyderabad Deccan, 1356 AH, volume 7, page 134."

- ³² The principle of 'wala and bara', originally a concept to unify diverse groups of people on ideological grounds into a single community - the 'Ummah', despite their racial or ethnic differences - eventually took on a broader role akin to national identity. It developed a notion that mere dissociation from individuals based on their belonging to non-Muslim nations was enough, regardless of whether their stance towards Islam was antagonistic or friendly. In the early days, we see instances where the remarkable growth of the Medinan state, followed by the administrative needs of the Umayyad and Abbasid regimes, compelled the appointment of competent non-Muslim individuals to various administrative roles. However, when in Abbasid Baghdad the influence of capable non-Muslim individuals became noticeable, a set of traditions surfaced that could potentially rein in the munificence of Muslim rulers. In our perspective, all traditions attempting to view People of the Book as alien entities emerged during this period, the most noteworthy being the account of the Banu Qurayza massacre. Over time, due to repetitive recounting, this narrative has attained an elevated level of authenticity in historical resources. Yet, it neither complies fully with reason nor stands up to standard historical critique. When a narrative like the Banu Qurayza can find such a firm place in our historical literature that it affects the portrayal of the "Mercy to the Worlds" (Prophet Muhammad) in subsequent centuries, we can only

speculate how many such minor and major incidents have etched their place in our historical sources.

Ibn Taymiyyah narrates an incident through Imam Ahmad involving Abu Musa al-Ashari. When al-Ashari informed Caliph Umar that he had hired a Christian secretary, Umar responded with indignation, "Was there not a Muslim available?" Al-Ashari justified his actions by stating he employed the secretary for his services, not his religion. Umar is reported to have retorted, "I do not honour them when Allah has dishonoured them, nor dignify them when Allah has humbled them, nor bring them close when Allah has distanced them."

- 33 In the period of the Abbasid caliphate, we observe a shift in the attitudes towards the People of the Book, an evolution grounded in the intellectual spheres of the time. The seminal work by Shafi'i, *Kitab Al-Umm*, offers an in-depth analysis of this change. An intriguing excerpt highlights the scenario when an Imam contemplates drafting a peace treaty predicated on the Jizya tax. (Refer to Shafi'i, *Kitab Al-Umm*, Vol. 4, pp. 197–199).
- 34 Historian Tabari reports that in the year 850 CE, Al-Mutawakkil, the Abbasid Caliph, decreed the demolition of recently constructed Christian churches. In a distinguishing move to separate Christian homes from those of Muslims, Christians were required to display a wooden symbol, deemed to represent the devil, on their entrance doors.
- 35 It is commonly accepted among the Muslim community that the terms 'those who have incurred [Your] wrath' (غير المغضوب عليهم) and 'those who have gone astray' (ولا الضالين) in the Quran refer to Jews and Christians respectively. This understanding is largely based on a claim made by Ibn Taymiyyah in his work 'Iqtida' al-Sirat al-Mustaqim,' which is itself likely founded on a Hadith narrated by Adi bin Hatim and recorded in Tirmidhi. In this Hadith, Prophet Muhammad is reported to have identified the Jews as the 'wrath-incurred' (almaghzoob) and the Christians as the 'misguided' (aldaleen).

- ³⁶ The tradition of interpreting the Quran in a historical context (tafsir ma'sur) has inadvertently led us to view it as a tale of the past, with its primary audience hidden within the pages of history dating back to fourteen centuries. Often, we don't consider that the message of divine revelation was intended for living, breathing people of its own time, greatly influenced by the culture and context in which they lived. Should we approach these verses without the bias of historical context, we might clearly see how the Quran provides guidance to our modern world. Conversely, saying that verses like 5:60 - describing people cursed by God and who have incurred His wrath - are solely about the Jews of that time, or that 58:14 - referring to those who ally themselves with a group that incurs God's wrath - are just about the hypocrites who sided with the Jews, confines the divine revelation to a historical timeframe. While our interpreters may provide accurate historical perspectives, it is virtually impossible to completely capture the context of any period in history. Therefore, understanding Quranic verses in a historical backdrop cannot reveal all dimensions of the divine revelation. Rather than viewing the Quran as a commentary on the past, it would be more appropriate to identify who, in our own era, deserves the addresses and references made in the Quran. Who are those people today that these verses apply to - those who are 'stricken with vileness wherever they are found' (3:112), or those who 'followed the passions of a people who had gone astray before' (5:77)? Sometimes we might even feel that the severe criticisms in the Quran are not directed at others, but at us Muslims ourselves. We might feel accused of letting slip the "rope of Allah" from our hands. This critical reading of the Quran could lead us to recognize and rectify our own errors. If, however, we continue to believe that the severe criticisms in the Quran only apply to the ancient nations, the Jews, and Christians of that time, while we Muslims, despite our intellectual and practical deviations, are the sole recipients of the verses of promise, we will find all doors to reformation closed despite the presence of this guiding book.

- ³⁷ The diversity in religions and nations is a part of the divine design, as clearly illustrated by verses such as {ولو شاء الله لجعلكم امة} (Quran 5:48) - "And if Allah had willed, He could have made you [of] one religion". No reason can justify the idea that the path to salvation should be monopolized by any one sect. This idea is precisely what the Quran explicitly refutes. The claim of Jews and Christians that {لن يدخل الجنة الا من كان هوداً او نصارى} - "None will enter Paradise except one who is a Jew or a Christian" is treated by the Quran as a reflection of their presumptions. The Quranic position is {بلا من اسلم وجهه لله وهو محسن} (Quran 2:112) - "Indeed, those who have submitted themselves entirely to Allah and are doers of good will have their reward with their Lord, and there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve". The same sentiment is conveyed in the preceding verses of Surah Al-Baqarah {ان الذين آمنوا والذين هادوا والنصارى والصابئين من آمن بالله واليوم الآخر} (Quran 2:62) - "Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans - those who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve". The endorsement of this belief is also found in {قل يا اهل} - "Say, O People of the Scripture, you are [standing] on nothing until you uphold [the law of] the Torah, the Gospel,". This suggests that the followers of earlier Prophets, if they steadfastly adhere to their divine revelations, will not be deprived of God's mercy. In light of the preceding verses to {ان هذمتكم امة واحدة} - "Indeed, this community of yours is one community", the detailed references to the nations of earlier Prophets collectively regard them as sojourners on this journey of truth-seekers. As such, the idea that, just like Christians cannot conceive salvation without Jesus, so too Muslims might see the followers of earlier Prophets as being outside God's mercy, contradicts the Quranic notion of

Ummah. The particular notion of Jesus as the indispensable savior in the Christian world is a later construct, referred to by Christian scholars as the Post-Resurrection Affirmation of Christ. The re-emergence of this belief among Muslims is underpinned by traditions such as the one where Abu Hurairah reports that the Prophet said, "By the One in Whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, there is no-one of this Ummah, Jew or Christian, who hears of me then dies without believing in that with which I have been sent, but he will be one of the people of Hell." (Sahih Muslim). Despite these conflicting accounts of revelation and tradition, there have always been scholars who have anticipated God's mercy to be inclusive for the righteous followers of earlier Prophets. For example, refer to Rashid Rida's perspective in *Tafsir Al-Manar*, Vol 1, p.336.

The Glossary

Abrogation (Naskh, النسخ): This concept in Islamic theology refers to the belief that certain Quranic revelations supersede earlier ones, influencing the development of Islamic law and doctrine over time. However, this concept is often misconceived, as no specific verse in the Quran can be definitively identified as abrogated and cancelled, according to what is considered scriptural.

Ahl-al-Kufr (أهل الكفر): Literally 'people of disbelief', referring to those who reject monotheism and the teachings of the Quran.

Al-Din (الدين): Translated as 'religion' or 'way of life', this term in Islam signifies a comprehensive system encompassing not only rituals and beliefs but also guiding ethical, social, and personal aspects of life. It represents Islam as a holistic path of submission to God's will.

Al-Islam (الإسلام): Literally meaning 'submission', it refers to the religion of Islam, emphasizing complete surrender to God's will. It is viewed as a universal and timeless faith system rather than a set of isolated religious practices.

Al-Maruf (المعروف): This term refers to that which is known to be good, righteous, and in accordance with Islamic ethics and values. It encompasses concepts of common good and moral obligation in society.

Aqeedah (عقيدة): The set of core beliefs held by a Muslim, including faith in Allah, prophets, the Day of Judgment, angels, divine decree, and the afterlife. It forms the foundation of a Muslim's faith and practice.

Asbab al-Nuzul (Circumstances of Revelation): The study of the historical context of Quranic verses to better understand their meaning and implications.

Ashtiname: A document attributed to Prophet Muhammad that assured protection and rights to Christian communities.

Battle of Ridda: A series of military campaigns led by Caliph Abu Bakr against Arabian tribes that apostatized following Prophet Muhammad's death.

Charter of Medina: An agreement made by Prophet Muhammad with various tribes and religious groups in Medina, establishing a pluralistic society based on mutual respect and coexistence.

Common Word (كلمة سواء): A principle in Islamic dialogue that seeks common ground between Muslims and people of other faiths, particularly around the concept of monotheism.

Companions of the Cave (أصحاب الكهف): A Quranic story symbolizing steadfast faith under trials, also known as the 'Seven Sleepers' in Christian tradition. It highlights themes of divine protection and faith endurance.

Direct Relationship with the Divine: A concept emphasizing a personal and unmediated connection with God, free from institutional or clerical intermediaries, advocating for an individual and direct engagement with the divine as outlined in the Quran.

Divine Colour (Sibghat Allah, صبغة الله): The concept of embodying the essence and qualities of God in one's life, symbolizing complete submission and devotion.

Divine Revelation (Wahy): Central to Islamic belief, divine revelation refers to the guidance and messages from Allah, primarily contained within the Quran. The book emphasizes the Quran's paramount importance as the ultimate and definitive reference in understanding Islam, surpassing historical, jurisprudential, and traditional sources.

Divine Unity in Humanity: The concept that monotheism unites humanity under the worship of one God, transcending national, ethnic, and cultural differences.

Diwan al-Ata: A historical system of stipends and rewards established during the early Islamic caliphates, particularly under Caliph Umar.

Fatimid Caliphate: An Islamic dynasty that ruled parts of the Muslim world and was known for its distinctive interpretation and practice of Islam.

Fiqh (فقه): Islamic jurisprudence, or the understanding and application of Islamic law. Fiqh covers a wide range of aspects from ritual worship to personal conduct and is derived from the Quran, Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), Ijma, and Qiyas (analogical reasoning).

Fitrah (فطرة): An innate, natural disposition within every human being, according to Islamic belief, which inclines them towards understanding God and distinguishing right from wrong. It's considered the foundation of moral intuition and spiritual consciousness.

God-consciousness (Taqwa, التقوى): A fundamental Islamic concept emphasizing mindfulness of God. It involves living in a way that reflects awareness and fear of God, influencing ethical behavior, and guiding moral choices.

Good Tidings and Warnings (بشيراً ونذيراً): The role of Prophet Muhammad as a messenger bringing good news and warnings to all humanity.

Hadith Compilation and Authentication: The process of collecting, recording, and verifying the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad, forming a significant part of Islamic scholarship.

Hagiographic History: The idealized or overly reverential portrayal of Islamic history, which may blur the distinction between historical events and religious teachings.

Hajj (حج): The annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, obligatory for all Muslims who are physically and financially able to undertake it once in their lifetime. It's one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Hanif Muslim: Refers to someone who follows the monotheistic faith of Prophet Abraham, characterized by a pure, uncompromising devotion to the oneness of God.

Hijrah (هجرة): The historical migration of Prophet Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. Symbolically, it represents a journey from a state of oppression to freedom and from moral wrongness to righteousness.

Hiyal al-Fiqh (Legal Stratagems): Techniques used in Islamic jurisprudence to find lawful means to achieve a desired end, often in complex legal situations.

Holistic Understanding of the Quran: Encourages viewing the Quran not just as a book of laws but as a comprehensive guide for life, offering enlightenment and guidance in all aspects of living.

Ibadi (الإباضية): A distinct branch of Islam, separate from Sunni and Shia traditions. Ibadis are known for their moderate views, emphasis on community consensus, and historical roots in early Islam.

Ijma (إجماع): The consensus of Islamic scholars on a theological or legal issue. It's a key source of Islamic jurisprudence and is used to interpret Sharia law and Islamic doctrine.

Imamat (الإمامة): In Shia Islam, it refers to the spiritual and temporal leadership of the Imams, who are considered successors to Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis generally interpret it as the leadership in prayers and community affairs.

Iman (إيمان): Refers to the faith or belief in the core principles of Islam, including belief in one God, prophets, revealed scriptures, angels, the Day of Judgment, and divine decree.

Islamic Banking and Finance: Financial practices and institutions that comply with Islamic law, particularly in relation to interest and ethical investing.

Isma'ili (الإسماعيلية): A sect within Shia Islam, characterized by its esoteric interpretation of Islamic teachings and belief in a continuing line of Imams, who are spiritual leaders with divine authority.

Jahmiyyah, Qadariyyah, Jabriyyah, Khawarij: Islamic theological groups known for their distinct beliefs. Jahmiyyah and Jabriyyah are associated with predestination, Qadariyyah with free will, and Khawarij with extreme legalistic interpretations.

Jama'at Tabligh (Faith Movement): An Islamic missionary movement focused on encouraging Muslims to practice their religion more devoutly.

Jurisprudence (Fiqh): The science of understanding and applying Islamic law, derived from the Quran, Hadith, consensus (Ijma), and analogy (Qiyas). It covers all aspects of a Muslim's life, from daily rituals to ethical conduct.

Kalalah in Inheritance Law: A term in Islamic inheritance law that has been subject to various interpretations, affecting the distribution of inheritance.

Kalam (كلام): Islamic scholastic theology that involves intellectual discussions on the nature of God, free will, predestination, and other metaphysical topics. It played a crucial role in defending and explaining Islamic beliefs.

Kharijites (الخوارج): An early, radical Islamic sect known for their strict and literal interpretations of the Quran and Hadith. They are notorious for their practice of takfir, declaring other Muslims as unbelievers over doctrinal differences.

Mercy for All Worlds (رحمة للعالمين): The description of Prophet Muhammad as a mercy to all of creation, emphasizing the universal and inclusive nature of his message.

Mohammadi Identity: A term that refers to an identity overly focused on Prophet Muhammad, potentially at the expense of the broader, universal aspects of Islam.

Monotheism (Tawheed, توحيد): The central Islamic tenet of believing in the absolute oneness of God. It rejects any form of polytheism and asserts that Allah is the only true deity.

Monotheistic Purity: The concept of pure, uncompromising belief in the oneness of God, central to the teachings of all prophets and fundamental to Islam.

Muslim Nation: The collective of all Muslims worldwide, unified by their faith and submission to Allah, transcending ethnic, cultural, and geographical boundaries.

Muslim Ummah vs. Muhammadan Community: The distinction between viewing the global Muslim community as a broad, inclusive group united in faith (Muslim Ummah) versus a more limited group defined primarily by followers of Prophet Muhammad (Muhammadan Community).

Mu'tazili and Ash'arism: Islamic theological schools of thought that represent different approaches to understanding and interpreting the Quran and Islamic doctrine.

People of the Book (Ahl-e-Kitab): A Quranic term for Jews and Christians, recognized for their monotheistic beliefs and possession of earlier revelations from God.

Pluralism/Inclusivity: In Islamic context, this refers to the acceptance and harmonious coexistence of various religious, ethnic, and ideological groups. Islam views this diversity as a part of God's divine plan, encouraging mutual recognition and respect among different communities.

Prophet Mohammed (النبي محمد): Regarded as the last prophet in Islam, Mohammed is credited with receiving the Quranic revelations. He is revered as a model of virtue, and his life and teachings are central to Islamic belief and practice.

Prophetic Continuum: The unbroken chain of monotheistic teachings and guidance from the earliest prophets to Prophet Muhammad, emphasizing a consistent message of submission to God.

Prophetic Figures: Key religious personalities in Islamic history, such as Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and others, revered for their unwavering devotion to God.

Prophetic Mission: The divine task assigned to prophets, including Muhammad, to guide humanity towards monotheism and righteous living according to God's will.

Qiyas (Analogy): The process of applying principles from known cases to new cases in Islamic law.

Quran as a Beacon of Guidance: The concept that the Quran is more than a legal document; it is a holistic guide for life, emphasizing ethics, spirituality, and social justice.

Rabbani Identity (رباني): A divinely inspired identity that Muslims bear, focusing on a relationship with God rather than solely on the figure of Prophet Muhammad. It emphasizes a broader, monotheistic faith shared across all prophets.

Rabbaniyyah (God-Centered Worldview) (ربانية): Refers to a monotheistic worldview that centers around the belief in and submission to a singular, supreme God. This perspective influences how individuals perceive and interact with the universe, emphasizing a harmonious relationship between humanity, the cosmos, and the Divine. In this worldview, all aspects of life are seen in relation to the divine will and guidance, fostering a holistic understanding of existence that integrates spiritual and worldly aspects.

Rajm (Stoning): A controversial and debated punishment for adultery in Islamic jurisprudence, with discussions around its basis in the Quran and Hadith.

Rediscovering Early Islam: This concept involves reconnecting with the original form of Islam as practiced during the Prophet Muhammad's era, focusing on the Quran's teachings before the development of various sects and theological interpretations.

Salaf Saliheen (Righteous Predecessors): The early generations of Muslims, including the companions of the Prophet, revered for their close adherence to Islamic teachings.

Sectarianism: This term describes the division of Islam into sects such as Shia, Sunni, Ibadi, and Ismaili. The book critiques this fragmentation, suggesting it leads to a loss of the dynamic nature of faith and a descent into rigid dogmatism.

Shariah: Traditionally understood as Islamic law, encompassing a wide range of religious, social, and personal laws derived from the Quran, Hadith, Ijma (consensus), and Qiyas (analogy).

Shu'ubiyah Movement: A historical movement highlighting the tensions and distinctions between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims (Mawali), particularly during the Umayyad period.

Sibghatullah (صبغة الله): Literally 'the color of God', symbolizing the Islamic ideal of enveloping one's identity in devotion and obedience to God. It represents a life deeply immersed in the qualities and values prescribed by God.

Stewardship Over the Cosmos: An Islamic concept that highlights the responsibility of humans to care for, manage, and utilize the universe responsibly, recognizing it as part of God's creation.

Straight Path (Sirat al-Mustaqim): The righteous and divinely ordained path that Muslims strive to follow, involving adherence to Islamic principles and teachings.

Triple Talaq (Instant Divorce): A practice in Islamic law where a husband can divorce his wife instantly by saying "talaq" three times, subject to significant debate and reform.

Ummah (أمة): The collective community of Muslims worldwide, transcending ethnic, national, and geographical divides. It embodies the concept of a global brotherhood united by the common faith in Islam.

Ummah Muhammadiyah: A term used to describe the community of followers of Prophet Muhammad. It can imply a focus on the community's identity as followers of Muhammad, potentially overshadowing the universal message of Islam.

Ummah Muslimah (أمة مسلمة): Refers to the Muslim community or nation, historically rooted in the teachings of Abraham and encompassing all believers who submit to God across time and space.

Ummah: The global community of Muslims, which in a broader sense includes all followers of previous prophets, emphasizing the unity and continuity of divine guidance throughout history.

Zakat (زكاة): A mandatory form of almsgiving in Islam, requiring qualifying Muslims to give a fixed portion of their wealth to charity. It aims to alleviate poverty and ensure economic equality.